TRI-SECTOR COLLABORATION AS SOCIAL INNOVATION IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN THE USA: DEVELOPING EMPLOYER RESOURCE NETWORKS

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Abstract

Tri-sector collaboration in the area of workforce development is an emerging social innovation in the United States. Unemployment and poverty, particularly in the Midwest region of the U.S. have been viewed as intractable social problems. Although the war on poverty has been waged across the nation for more than 50 years, public sector approaches have been largely unsuccessful at addressing these issues. Policy makers have enacted broad based budget cuts, fostering a culture of austerity. Yet, in economies shifting from an industrial base to service and knowledge based workers, there is a clear need to develop and reskill workers. Public, private, non-profit partnerships have proven to be effective in development of "employer resource networks" (ERNs). ERNs are socially sustainable intermediaries that function as learning communities to: facilitate the reduction of barriers between sectors, foster information sharing and alignment, and aggregate resources around the common goal of employee development and job retention. The role of the employer as a socially

responsible leader is a key feature of the model. This multi-media presentation will: present the history and development of the ERN model, and summarize case studies from ERNS in the United States and abroad.

Key Words: social innovation, employment, collaboration, network, development

Resumen

La colaboración tri-sectorial en el área de desarrollo de la fuerza es una innovación social emergente en los Estados Unidos. El desempleo y la pobreza, en particular en la región del Medio Oeste de los Estados Unidos, han sido vistos como problemas sociales de difícil solución. A pesar de que la guerra contra la pobreza ha sido llevada a cabo en todo el país desde hace más de 50 años, los enfoques del sector público no han tenido éxito en hacer frente a estos problemas. Los responsables políticos han promulgado recortes en el presupuesto de amplia base, fomentando una cultura de austeridad. Sin embargo, en las economías cambiantes de una base industrial para dar servicio a los trabajadores y basadas en el conocimiento, existe una clara necesidad de desarrollar y readaptación profesional del trabajo. Asociaciones privadas sin ánimo de lucro públicas han demostrado ser eficaz en el desarrollo de redes de empleadores "recursos" o (RER). Las RER son socialmente sostenibles intermediarios que funcionan como comunidades de aprendizaje para facilitar la reducción de las barreras entre los sectores, el intercambio de información y la alineación de crianza, y sus recursos agregados en torno al objetivo común de desarrollo de los empleados y la conservación del empleo. El papel del empresario como líder socialmente responsable es una característica clave del modelo. Esta presentación multimedia será: presentar la historia y el desarrollo del modelo de ERN, y resumir los estudios de caso de ERNS en los Estados Unidos y en el extranjero.

Palabras clave: innovación social, el empleo, la colaboración, la red, el desarrollo

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Introduction

Policy makers and program administrators have directed much attention and effort to developing service models to assist low wage workers in job retention and advancement (Derr and Holcomb, 2010; Martinson and Holcomb, 2007). Princeton economist Alan Krueger observes that the economic data challenge the notion that the United States is an exceptionally mobile society (2015). Researchers have repeatedly found that in the United States, there is now less economic mobility than in Canada or much of Europe. "A child born in the bottom quintile of incomes in the United States has only a 4 percent chance of rising to the top quintile, according to a 2012 Pew Study, *Pursing the American Dream, Economic Mobility Across Generations* (Pew, 2012, p.2). Addressing intergenerational poverty through sustainable workforce development is a challenge for social workers. *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action* (2012) has recognized that:

> Unjust and poorly regulated economic systems, driven by unaccountable market forces, together with noncompliance with international standards for labour conditions and a lack of corporate social responsibility have damaged the health and well-being of people and communities causing poverty and social inequality (p. 837).

The demand for social services is growing exponentially, so government, businesses, and nonprofits will need to work together to find creative solutions to effectively leverage what each sector has attempted to do independently without success. From this vantage point, this paper explores recent efforts at workforce development, through the organization of employer-based networks of resources and information for workers, or Employer Resource Networks (ERNs).

History of Social Work and Workforce Development

Social workers and social development practitioners have a history of working with and against systems of human labor that at once may empower and perpetuate social inequality. The charity work of "friendly visitors" served to ameliorate conditions of human suffering, but occurred without critical reflection on the origins of the situations and an analysis of the causes of inequality (Reisch & Andrews, 2001; McGerr, 2003). Professional social work emerged from the Settlement House Movement in the United States in a

context of rapid expansion of market competition industrialization and the demand for a pliable and dispensable immigrant workforce.

More than a century later, although the macro-economic conditions have shifted from industrial to knowledge and service based economies, concerns about the plight of workers persist. Through the development of a formalized labor movement, education, and reforms, the middle class experienced a period of expansion. Yet, growth of the welfare state was sharply criticized by conservatives in the 1980's (Piven, 2007). Austerity measures in public policy followed with three decades of the welfare state being dismantled by privatization and budget cuts. In the following years, the health and well-being of the middle class declined, with massive job losses and global outsourcing of labor (Young, 2013). The need for the development and reskilling of unemployed workers is a central concern in the US and across the globe. Low wage workers who experience high rates of job turnover and financial difficulties are often unable to advance to better jobs (Joyce Foundation, 2002; Holzer, Stoll, and Wissoker, 2004; Arc and Loprest, 2005; Jantii, 2008).

Employer Resource Networks as Social Innovation

Young (2013) described social innovation as a "novel mechanism that increases the welfare of the individuals who adopt it compared with the status quo" (p. 2185). Social innovation combines both idea generation and a socially sustainable outcome. Jane Addam's Hull House was a site for the profession's original social innovation, with the emergence development services for poor immigrant workers in Chicago (Sherwood, 2015). Today, addressing social problems using entrepreneurship skills, microenterprise activities and tri-sector collaboration represent an integration of profit and human development motives (Nandan, London, and Bent-Goodly, 2015). New kinds of organizations are emerging at the intersection of government, business and non-profits, called Benefits Corporations (or B-corps)(Bradley, 2003).

While relationships between social work (and by extension, government) and business may have been formerly viewed as adversarial in nature, and the abuses of industry are well-documented, rigid either-or categorizations represent an over-implication of potentially useful blended social-government-business models. Corporate social responsibility in the area of sustainable employment practices, necessitates that

business take an active role in the development and if need be, investment in the reskilling and redevelopment of displaced workers.

Employer Resource Networks are based on these new approaches to collaboration between business, non-profits and government. ERNs are socially sustainable intermediaries that function as learning communities to: facilitate the reduction of barriers between sectors, foster information sharing and alignment, and aggregate resources around the common goal of employee development and job retention (Timmeney & Hollenbeck, 2012).

Overview of the ERN Model

Effective tri-sector collaboration requires that along with employees, all three components – employers, non-profit organizations, and governmental agencies work together sharing information, data, common goals and resources. Employer Resource Networks are private-public consortia whose mission is to improve workforce retention through employee support and training. Key ERN innovations are: engagement of businesses as leaders in workforce development; cross-sector collaboration; workplace-based employee success coaching (case management); and real-time referrals to local community resources to address needs such as transportation, child care, housing, foreclosure, health care, stress and related issues that may impact job performance and retention.

The Employer Resources Network (ERN) is new approach to workforce development, created in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2008 (Timmeney & Hollenbeck, 2012). The model evolved from what was learned from The SOURCE, an early consortium of employers, and Cascade Engineering. In order to fully develop the ERN model beyond the local application used by The SOURCE, another non-profit organization called West Michigan TEAM (Tri-Sector Employment and Advancement Model) secured funding for the WIRED grant (Workforce Innovation for Regional Economic Development) through the Department of Labor in 2006-2009, thus launching the first two fully functional ERNs in Michigan.

Key features of the ERN model are an employer member governance structure, the virtual organization of employers across a broader geographic region and the onsite delivery of services to employees. Since 2008,

the model has been adopted and implemented at ten sites in Michigan across twelve counties with over 80 employers. Nationally, four ERNs have been developed in three states: Wisconsin, Indiana, and New York through the work of a company launched from West Michigan TEAM, called DISC (Disruptive Innovations for Social Change) (Vanderhulst and Sherwood, 2016, In press). A timeline for the development of the ERN model is presented below.

Figure 1. Time line for ERN Development

| 1996 Cascade Engineering Welfare to Career | 2000 Introduction of Hidden Rules of Poverty | 2001 Delta Strategy Poverty Dialogue Action Groups | 2003 The SOURCE Model | 2006-2009 US DOL WIRED | 2007 West Michigan TEAM formed | 2008 - Current Employer Resource Network Model |

Employer Resource Networks have the following characteristics:

1) Employer Resource Networks are employer-based (rather than government or NGO based)

2) Typically include five to ten small-to mid-size employers that create economies of scale that positively impact their bottom-line, by pooling resources with other employers, human services organizations, and governmental agencies

3) Employers financially invest in the ERN by purchasing a share of the success coaches time

4) ERNS pull together education, training and long-term job retention services to be delivered on site to the employee and employer

5) While the focus is on the retention and advancement of low wage employees, ERN services are available to all employees of member companies

6) Target employees may be receiving public assistance. ERNs include strong partnerships with top leadership, management and case workers at social service agencies to coordinate services, share data and evaluate impact of employment over the long term.

7) Community partners may include workforce development boards, chambers of commerce and economic development groups, community and technical colleges, and other training institutions.

Businesses

Businesses in an ERN are typically small to mid-size companies in the fields of manufacturing, retail, hospitality, health care, and human service organizations. They are companies that employ between 50 and 500 workers. The focus is on retention and advancement of employees in high turn-over positions that tend to pay entry level wages. This common challenge can be better met by businesses when they collaborate to share information, success coach staff, and resources. In doing so, smaller to mid-sized businesses can create economies of scale.

Characteristics of businesses best suited for ERNs:

1) A range of wage scales and skill levels

2) Similar training and worker service needs

3) Willing to fund shared staff or resources to increase efficiency

4) Not in direct competition with each other

5) Willing to establish public/private partnerships

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6) Willing to collaborate with other businesses

The ERN model works well when there is diversity in the fields of businesses (retail, industrial, health care) to sustain it in times of economic challenges. In times of recession, when turnover is low and layoffs occur, it is somewhat difficult to launch a new ERN.

Employees

Typically, about half of employees served by an ERN are receiving public assistance, while the remaining employees are just beyond the benefit eligibility (Vanderhulst & Sherwood, 2015). Both groups are at risk of having life circumstances financial issues, relationship conflict, medical conditions or a spouses job loss interfere with job retention and engagement. Throughout the past several decades, the primary emphasizes of workforce development was retention. However, with the economic down turn in the mid to late 2000's, the attention shifted to engagement and advancement. Removing barriers to retention keeps them on the job and focused.

Community-Based Partners

Community partners play key roles in effective ERNs. These entities include governmental and public and human service providers, non-profit or non-governmental organizations, and adult education agencies, community colleges, vocational training organizations, and universities. Collectively, they assist with sustainable development of workers to transition out of poverty.

Governmental Agencies. Workforce development and health and human service agencies such as: *One Stop Centers* for job seekers and employers, country level department of human services agencies, and state funded workforce development initiatives are key partners. It is essential to engage with leadership in local public assistance agencies in order to gain permission for a public assistance case manager to work on-site at member employers so that employees have direct access to services. Government agencies at the local, state and federal level may also provide funding to launch and sustain an ERN. In Michigan *Community Ventures* is a state funded economic development initiative that promotes employer and social enterprise. The mission is to alleviate poverty and promote safe and vibrant communities." It is essential that connections between government, non-profit and employers emphasize interface with public agencies at multiple levels.

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Non-profits (NGOs). Non-governmental or not for profit, educational and faith-based organizations whose mission is generally to assist persons with barriers to employment and advancement are also important partners. Examples include: Goodwill Industries, Salvation Army, and charitable organizations such as St. Joseph County, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, or City Mission in New York. In some cases organizations such as United Way, may serve in the role of a resource contributor and/or fiscal agent. NGO employed case managers, also categorized as success coaches or retention specialists, may be assigned to work on-site at member employers. The case manager's goals are more attainable through closer access to employees. Achievement of their work goals are typically workforce development related, such as job retention of low wage workers. Their salaries and benefits are still paid by the non-profit employer.

Community Colleges/Universities/Technical Training Schools. Within the ERN, long term success of low wage workers depends on successful linkages with private and public educational institutions whose mission is to provide working adults with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to succeed and advance in the workplace. In some cases, community colleges may be contractors of fiduciary agents for the local workforce development board. Examples: Westshore Community College in Mason County, Michigan aligns pre-employment training with the training provided by the ERN and delivering apprentice programs in entry STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) related jobs. Similarly, Mott Community College (MCC) in Flint, Michigan has two major roles, beyond the traditional role as a community college 1) MCC partners with Michigan Economic Development Corporations (MEDC) Community Ventures initiative 2) MCC acts as the fiduciary for the Mid- Michigan ERN, receiving the employer fees as part of their membership in the ERN.

Policy Context of the ERN Approach

The role of the employer in traditional public sector approaches, such as the Jobs Training Partnership Act 1982 (JTPA) was that of a *customer,* with government and community-based agencies providing services to train and develop workers. Following, the Workforce Investment Act (1998) reoriented the role of employers as that a *partner,* with the establishment of workforce investment boards made of employers, and public and non-profit leaders.

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This shift coincided with new approaches to welfare work requirements. In 1996, Michigan's Department of Human Services launched Project Zero, an initiative to achieve 100% employment for welfare recipients (Hu, Lowenburg, & Chojnacki, 2012). Many recipients of governmental cash and food assistance program, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) were able to find jobs. However, many struggled to keep them, let alone advance to a higher paying position with more responsibilities. Barriers included the loss of TANF benefits upon employment, lack of finances for car and home repairs, relationship issues at home and work, that many people encounter in the often precarious state of transitioning out of poverty (Joyce Foundation, 2002).

The concept of an employer resource network was a concept developed in in the late 1990's, in discussion groups focused on how to employers might work together as a collectively to overcome common challenges with retention of entry level workers. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, a small organization called the *Delta Strategy* convened community discussion forums and formed what was then called "dialogue and action groups" with the goal of making new connections between all three sectors to address issues of unemployment, lack of job skills, and poor job retention and advancement outcomes among low wage workers. Delta Strategy operated as a non-profit organization affiliated with a local community college, with a key role of convening a space for dialogue across sectors.

Over three hundred business, social service and government leaders participated in a community wide strategic planning session. Dialogue-action groups were then assigned to address each strategic goal. What emerged from the dialogue-action groups was somewhat of a radical concept. Employers could and perhaps should go beyond being partners to take the *lead* in addressing problems, from a tri-sector collaborative approach to address unemployment, turnover, job loss and the need for effective job skills development. Perhaps employers could be collaborative *investors*, in building a skilled community-based workforce.

The Role of a Progressive Company in ERN Development: Cascade Engineering

As a result of CEO Fred Keller and local business leaders such as James Vander Hulst from Butterball Farms, Tina Hartley from Goodwill Industries, and Penny Pestle from the Delta Strategy, the community mobilized collaborative efforts across sectors. Three key organizations came together to catalyze the first prototype for an ERN in Grand Rapids: Cascade Engineering, the Delta Strategy a non-profit convener of stakeholders and Kent County Department of Human Services. Prior to launching the ERN, Keller initiated a Welfare-to-Career (W2C) program at Cascade Engineering, a distinctly different program than other Welfare-to-Work programs. The W2C program included employee pre-employment assessment of potential barriers, supervisor training using the "Bridges Out of Poverty" materials, a co-located TANF case-manager, and long-term job retention services, even after the employee was no longer TANF eligible. The :Bridges Out of Poverty" training materials, authored by Dr. Ruby Payne, provide employees, supervisors and managers with a framework for understanding the cultures of poverty, middle class and wealth and information that has impact on occupational attainment and advancement. Stanford Social Innovation Review published an article lauding the Cascade Engineering for its success in employing and retaining welfare recipients (Bradley, 2003). At the time, Cascade Engineering had trained over 500 employees in Dr. Payne's model and retained over 90% of the former welfare recipients they hired. For their W2C program the company won the prestigious Ron Brown Award for Corporate Leadership, an award won by companies such as IBM and Coca Cola.

Keller's support was critical for building legitimacy to an employer lead, tri-sector workforce investment model and bringing other businesses to the table to collaborate. His company was known for innovation in design and as a profitable, national award-winning workplace culture. In response to the demand for low wage workers, and the high cost of turnover, Cascade Engineering formed a partnership with the local TANF agency (Cascade Culture, 2015). They began a new practice of co-locating a welfare case manager at the employer worksite to address the work, family, and financial challenges that were contributing to job loss and high turnover. This practical innovation could be replicated with a broader base of several employers.

One case manager could be assigned to multiple employers in the network. Co-locating the case manager increased the ease with which the employee could access assistance in remediating these issues. Reciprocally, it kept the case manager more directly informed about the status of clients, as they began to earn a paycheck and transition off of assistance. For example, an employee's absence from work due to a major car repair and the lack of funds to fix it could mean the loss of employment. The car repair may also mean that the employee has difficulty in coming to the local TANF agency or quickly getting in contact with the case manager. Under the new model, access to the case manager prevented this type of job loss. Keller had data to support the effectiveness of this approach. Figure 2 presents a downward trend in average monthly employee turnover from 1999 to 2001. Corresponding to this trend, Figure 3 reveals a similar trend in cost of turnover as calculated by Cascade Engineering's human resources department.

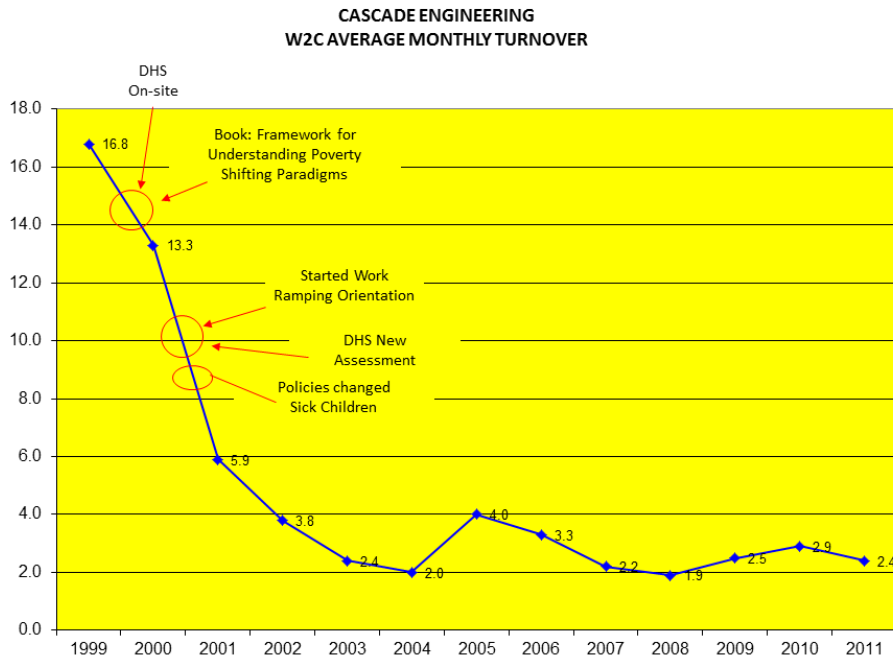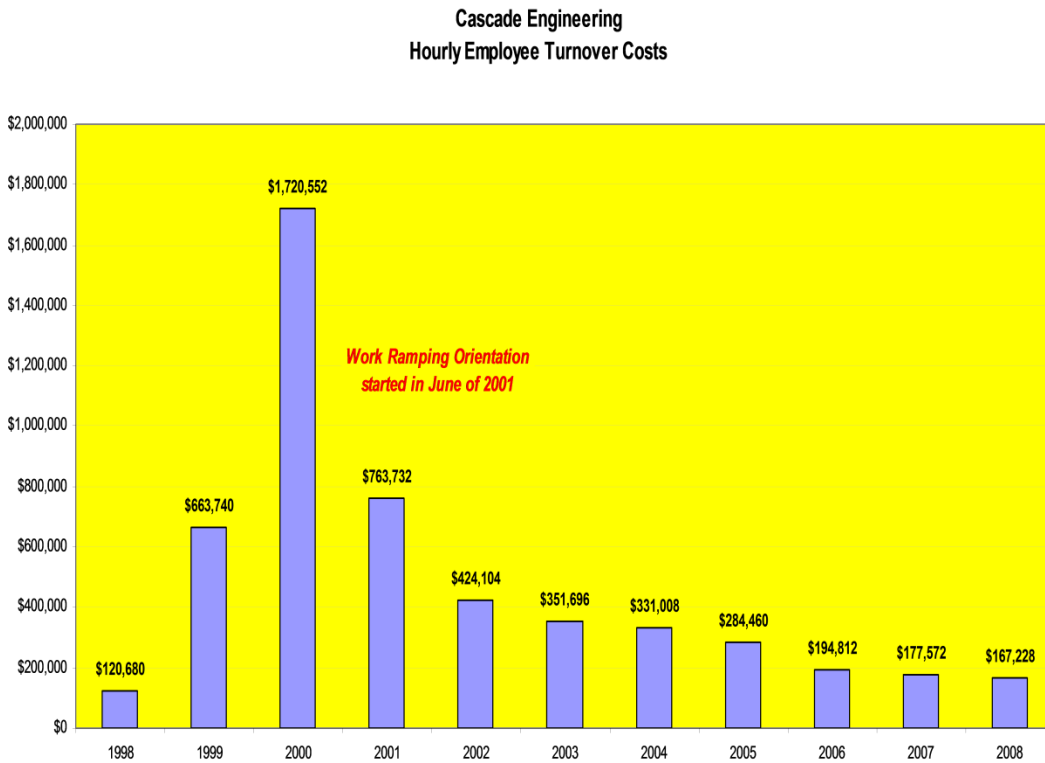**Figure 2. Cascade Engineering: Percentage of Average Monthly Turnover (1999-2011)**

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CASCADE ENGINEERING
W2C AVERAGE MONTHLY TURNOVER

Figure 3. Cascade Engineering: Hourly Employee Turnover Costs (1999-2008)

Cascade Engineering
Hourly Employee Turnover Costs

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These data demonstrate the measurable impact of Cascade Engineering's approach to workforce development. The company attributes their success, in large part, to their investment in employee training program based on the "Bridges out of Poverty" model (Cascade History, 2015).

The Importance of the "Bridges Out of Poverty" Training in ERNs

Created by educator, Dr. Ruby Payne, this framework for understanding poverty is an essential part of our learning, and a key component of the ERN strategy. The "bridges" concept comes from the notion that moving from one place to another requires some kind of structure, support or path. A bridge suggests that there may be barriers that must be traversed or overcome. Payne (2005) intended to help educators understand how to work with issues of social class in K-12 educational settings. Following the "Hidden Rules of Class at Work" intended for use by supervisors and trainers who want to develop employees and work place culture (Payne & Krabill, 2002). A successful fit between an employee and an organization involves an understanding that both bring three things: resources, social connections, and hidden rules. It's important to note that most managers come from a middle class context, and may know little about the culture and economic constraints of poverty (Payne & Krabill, 2002).

Bridging creates new linkages between employers that previously did not exist, so that they might share new insights, resources, and solutions to their common challenges, particularly with the retention and advancement of entry level, low-wage workers. Bridging makes connections between government and business, in order to share information and work effectively, and reach their common goal. Finally, bridging shares the costly mistakes and hard earned lessons learned from one community to another, so that together we might build a better Michigan, and with any luck, a better nation and global community.

Addressing Intergenerational Poverty

The economic realities of poverty, middle class, and wealth continue to impact people, communities, systems, and structure. In order to positively shape the lives of individuals in poverty, we must explore the way we think and behave. Looking at economic class in a nonjudgmental framework allows us to respect one another and evaluate the resources and choices available to us that may not be available to others. For those

living and working in poverty, choices are often constrained and a better future may seem unobtainable. Social work is based on the premise that all individuals, regardless of resources should have the opportunity to envision and develop a positive future.

In any economic situation, whether it is poverty, middle class or wealth, people have access to certain types of relationships, information, and resources. Oftentimes, such knowledge about relationships, information, and resources seem to be hidden to people outside of that economic group. One learns about the "hidden rules" of class primarily by family members, and in the case of the middle class, by institutions such as schools, government, and employers

Hidden Rules of Economic Class

The "bridges" concept is based on the assumption that maintenance of the hidden rules of economics, in effect may create situations that keep people in poverty, middle class or wealth, unless they learn another set of rules. Learning the "rules" of economic group must take place in the context of a relationship. For the person who grew up in intergenerational poverty, to rise to middle class, he will need education, employment, resources, information, and positive relationships with persons of middle class. He may face a loyalty conflict with his friends and family over choices to achieve over the long term by attending college courses, which can be identified as a middle class value, versus attending to urgent issues, which can be identified as a poverty value.

A close examination of these underlying assumptions and structural factors helps us to understand why our previous efforts in "the war on poverty" have failed. The table below summarizes the values, beliefs, and perspectives of individuals who must reside in poverty, middle class or wealth. These views come from the situations or contexts that people live in. Understanding the differences helps us to see what motivates another, as well as what hidden barriers to change might exist. For example, the purpose of money, food and clothing differs across groups. Money is to be spent or used in poverty and there is usually not enough. It is to be managed in middle class where there is enough money. For the wealthy, money is meant to be conserved or invested.

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Figure 4. The Hidden Rules of Economic Class

HIDDEN RULES AMONG CLASSES / FROM RUBY PAYNE'S "UNDERSTANDING POVERTY"

	POVERTY	MIDDLE CLASS	WEALTH
POSSESSIONS	People	Things	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees.
MONEY	To be used, spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved, invested.
PERSONALITY	Is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.	If for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	Is for connections. Financial, political, social connections are highly valued.
SOCIAL EMPHASIS	Social inclusion of people he/she likes.	Emphasis is on self-governance and self-sufficiency.	Emphasis is on social exclusion.
FOOD	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality important.	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important.
CLOTHING	Clothing valued for individual style and expression of personality.	Clothing valued for its quality and acceptance into norm of middle class. Label important.	Clothing valued for its artistic sense and expression. Designer important.
TIME	Present most important. Decisions made for moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important. Decisions made partially on basis of tradition and decorum.
EDUCATION	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections.
DESTINY	Believes in fate. Cannot do much to mitigate chance.	Believes in choice. Can change future with good choices now.	Noblesse oblige. ('Nobility Obliges')
LANGUAGE	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about networking.
FAMILY STRUCTURE	Tends to be matriarchal.	Tends to be patriarchal.	Depends on who has money.
WORLD VIEW	Sees world in terms of local setting.	Sees world in terms of national setting.	See world in terms of international view.
LOVE	Love and acceptance conditional, based upon whether individual is liked.	Love and acceptance conditional and based largely upon achievement.	Love and acceptance conditional and related to social standing and connections.
DRIVING FORCES	Survival, relationships, entertainment.	Work, achievement.	Financial, political, social connections.
HUMOR	About people and sex.	About situations.	About social faux pas.

Disruptive Innovations for Social Change (DISC)

Disruptive Innovations for Social Change (DISC), L3C seeks to incorporate several socially innovative practices into a single initiative, known as an Employer Resource Network, to determine how to best sequence elements of early intervention in employment stabilization, basic job skills and life skills training, financial asset development and career path development into a framework that bridges the gap between intergenerational poverty and sustainable workforce development.

DISC was established with the capacity to expand the work to other regions across the country and partner with other national organizations to further disseminate the outcomes and scale the approach. As previously stated, the intent of DISC is to foster "regional" networks across the United States and to provide a space where private and/or public partnerships can continue to innovate outside of their traditional roles ways to transform the existing system into a more efficient model. As a means to learn from this approach

and to disseminate and adapt the best practices, Disruptive Innovations for Social Change is an organization focused on working with communities to create strategies that engage private sector employers in demonstration projects that hold a promise to be transformative as opposed to incremental in nature. DISC took on the task of developing and scaling the initial ERN model, as well as, developing new social innovations.

West Michigan Team, an NGO focused locally in Grand Rapids, Michigan pioneered the ERN model, beginning with the work of Cascade Engineering in the mid 1990's. From this organization, DISC was launched as a new entity with a national focus on the development of ERNs. The model incorporates a social science framework for understanding poverty and welfare to career advancement. Since 2006, West Michigan TEAM also has developed ten ERNs across Michigan and DISC has provided leadership to seed five ERN communities nationally in the United States (Vanderhust & Sherwood, 2015),

Results of DISC

More specifically as a result of the work of ERNs, we experienced greater alignment of resources and collaboration by public human service and workforce development agencies across geo-political boundaries within the regions. We leveraged public resources on site at the workplace to support employees. We built stronger relationships with public partners to address needs such as sharing information, braiding funding across county entities, and collaborating with community / technical college districts to meet the needs of employees. Only through these collaborative relationships are we able to disaggregate public supports in a manner that increases the access for most low-skill workers.

During the recent recession, many of the member companies of the ERN sites in West Michigan and across the country have laid off employees (Vanderhulst & Sherwood, 2015). Within the ERN, employers shared projected hiring and lay-off information prior to implementation. Often times ERN members were able to avert a significant percentage of those shifting to unemployment by one employer hiring an employee in good standing, but scheduled to be laid off by another employer in the ERN. In some instances, employees participated in additional training or up-skilling in order to make this transition. DISC also leveraged its

partnership with the community college which resulted in a temporary work assignment or a permanent shift to the partner member employer (Vanderhulst & Sherwood, 2015).

Expanding the use of the ERN network and employer relationship to foster a more deliberate "social innovation lab" to further demonstrate strategies that increase access to benefits and address resource gaps. Several ERNs stated above, when presented with trending issues like lack of access to affordable childcare or reliable transportation, embarked on the development of innovative approached to expand resources to address these gaps collaboratively with community partners. For example, one ERN began providing transportation for employees, another ERN developed on on-site daycare. DISC continues to explore a means to structure a social innovation lab where we could demonstrate how employers could actively participate in developing new ways to implement employee supports where there are gaps in the public safety net.

Peer Learning Community

As the ERN Model has been implemented in various communities and regions, the ERN sites have incorporated lessons learned from the new adaptations through a peer learning community. Information sharing is facilitated across ERNs in Michigan and nationally through the efforts of DISC. As DISC expanded from manufacturing to health care to other sectors, a quarterly peer learning meeting is convened to increase the "cross-pollination" of ideas. DISC also endeavors to continue to connect the sites virtually by developing a more formal learning network by including each of the sites in the chronicling evaluation data and policy updates. This includes employers, public, education and nonprofit partners as well as funders.

Public Policy

DISC works directly with state and federal legislators, as well as the various administrative departments to engage employers as strategic partners and investors in assisting low-wage low-skill workers in their journey. If these strategies are to be sustained, existing policies must be formed to include tri-sector strategies to increase ERN support of incumbent workers trapped in low wage jobs. Social welfare policy needs to address the cliff effect, or rapid of the loss of public benefits, for the working poor so that they can successfully transition out of poverty.

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Moreover, public policy should expand the scope of resources available to individuals for asset development. In order for a single parent with children to invest in vocational training, there must be measures taken to stabilize their experiences of a constant series of economic crises. Assisting low wage workers with development of emergency funds can better stabilize their monthly budget as a foundational step. DISC continues to engage in these conversations at both the State and Federal level to explore new ways to provide building block for families and individuals to secure stable employment and access learning that enables them to succeed at work and in life.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Previous workforce development strategies have been short sighted and failed to address the intergenerational aspects of poverty. Federal and state initiatives tend to be short term strategies, with a disproportionate investment in initial attachment to a job as opposed to sustainable development of low-wage incumbent workers, through education, relational supports, access to financial resources, and addressing the intergenerational impact of poverty. Arguably, attachment to employment is not the only objective. It is however, the first step in a journey of life-long learning and progressive advancement toward economic self-sufficiency. ERNS assist low wage workers and employers with navigating access to governmental and social systems that provide sustained support. Workers empowered with knowledge of the hidden rules of economic class, particularly those with from intergenerational poverty, are better prepared for training, career development and advancement opportunities and more likely to sustain their efforts toward long-term self-sufficiency.

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