

# Interagency Network of Enterprise Assistance Providers



An unusual partnership of government agencies and private businesses communicate and collaborate to enhance services to small business.

by Carroll Thomas

Less than ten years ago, twenty million small businesses across America faced the catastrophic year 2000 crisis! Y2K, as it was called, threatened computers around the world because they were based on a DD/MM/YY formula. This formula made computers believe that the year 2000 was actually the year 1900, rendering them unable to correctly calculate any information dealing with time.

Enter a fairly young public-private program—the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP), headquartered at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)—which focuses on assisting small manufacturers around the country. Through collaboration, MEP was able to broker a deal with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Small Business Administration (SBA) Small Business Development Centers. Working together, they leveraged their reach and resources to small businesses across America and helped them avert the crisis. The successful collaboration helped millions of small businesses survive, but soon thereafter the synergistic collaborative efforts between the organizations ceased.

The looming Y2K catastrophe spurred the federal agencies that serve medium and small businesses to work together, but in today's interconnected world such collaboration needs to be routine and continuous. In January 2006, this need led to the formation of a more formal public-private network, the Interagency Network of Enterprise Assistance Providers (INEAP).

## Goals and Membership

INEAP is a coalition of people from federal (and some private and nonprofit) organizations whose primary mission is to assist small businesses. It has three major goals:

1. Establish and maintain positive relationships among the people who run these programs.
2. Use those relationships to learn about the various programs—what they offer, whom they serve, and what if any collaborative relationships they currently have with related programs.
3. Use that knowledge to find opportunities to collaborate and improve services to small businesses.

INEAP members come from forty-five business and technical assistance programs, including the SBA; Export-Import Bank; U.S. Departments of Commerce (DOC), Labor (DOL), and Energy (DOE); and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and other nonprofit organizations are also involved.

INEAP's stakeholders are other federal, state, and private providers that offer services to or have a network with small and medium-size businesses. Congress is also a customer and stakeholder.

## Functions

Fifteen to forty INEAP members, depending on the agenda, meet monthly. The meetings typically help members learn about other programs' offerings. Each meeting focuses on a theme: support to veteran-owned businesses, international trade and financing, loan programs to businesses, and the like. Between meetings, various INEAP members forge the formal and informal partnerships that actually accomplish the network's goals.

INEAP has no senior sponsor, no formal charter, and no official mandate. It operates with a few ground rules (such as respect members and each other's programs and commit to sharing program information), but compared with some partnerships, it functions in a very informal manner. Members prefer it that way because the low profile keeps bureaucracy to a minimum.

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Antonio Doss, the director of SBA's Small Business Development Centers, and Carroll Thomas, partnership catalyst for MEP and author of this article, founded this interagency group and facilitate the monthly meetings. We recently established an executive core council of the most active INEAP members, which shares the leadership tasks. Meetings rotate among the members' downtown offices. When resources (people, meeting rooms, and the like) are needed, the leaders ask members to contribute them.

High technology has not played a major role in the network's operation, but INEAP *does* make occasional use of the Web, and its Web site—[www.ineap.nist.gov/ineap/](http://www.ineap.nist.gov/ineap/)—has an external and internal component. The internal area is for members to share information—on topics such as business disaster preparedness, computer recycling programs, and energy efficiency—with other members and their clients. INEAP also plans to offer a series of Webcasts on assistance programs for the tax-paying business owners its organizations serve.

The major communication tool INEAP members use is an old-fashioned one—meeting and talking directly with each other to exchange information and find common purpose.

## A Meeting

On September 26, 2007, fifteen INEAP members and visitors gathered at DOE in Washington, DC, for the monthly meeting, one that had a particular sense of energy and enthusiasm. Participants were from DOL, DOE, DOC, four EPA program offices, and the AACC.

Members' presentations took up much of the time, but this meeting differed in the connection and synergy apparent in the room. One member discussed a partnership among several agencies and private-sector groups to reduce energy usage by 25 percent over the next decade, and its plan to post its methods, tools, and progress on a Web to share them with other companies. That got the attention of an EPA representative, who wanted to know more about the partnership and how the members were working together. That member then mentioned a consortium of college presidents who are meeting to find ways to reduce energy consumption on their campuses, which prompted someone else to talk about an upcoming conference on best practices in energy usage and lean methods within government agencies.

David Widawsky, Associate Director for Policy Innovation at EPA's National Center for Policy Innovation (one of the original INEAP members), says,

“I feel fortunate and blessed to be at INEAP meetings. They stimulate many creative ideas and opportunities. . . . At most business meetings, we start with a problem or desired outcome, and try to figure out how to get there. That's a smart way to go, but it doesn't necessarily lead to creative thinking. At INEAP meetings we have a presentation as the starting point. Someone talks about their program. That leads to questions and discussion, then some exploration to see where there might be opportunities for collaboration. That's where the light bulbs start coming on! These kinds of discussions lead to lots of new ideas, we gain knowledge about programs that could affect our clients, and sometimes we start new partnerships as a result of what we learned and who we met. INEAP gives us a license to think laterally.”

## Examples Green Suppliers Network

Before INEAP, MEP and EPA established the Green Suppliers Network (GSN), a collaboration between government and industry that focuses on the dual challenge of reducing the environmental impact of small and mid-size manufacturing suppliers and increasing the companies' efficiency, productivity, and profitability. GSN employs “lean” and “clean” methods, which concentrate on the root causes of waste in a facility and provide a framework for achieving specific measurable environmental and business objectives. GSN helps companies in three areas: lean processes, reduced energy consumption, and reduced impact on the environment.

In Missouri, MEP had been working with EPA to identify companies interested in GSN reviews. At the same time, it was working with the local DOE industrial assessment center to identify and assist companies interested in energy assessments. And it was providing lean assessments to identify waste in processes and materials. The problem was that all three of these activities were happening separately.

Jimmy Story, business program manager of the Missouri MEP, was looking for ways to offer the GSN package of three assessments as one package that made sense to the manufacturers. At an INEAP meeting in Washington, MEP and EPA program managers discussed the need to bring the three GSN elements together and learned that Jimmy Story was looking for the same thing at the field level. Tara O'Hare, INEAP member from

EPA, contacted him and offered to help. That's when things started to take off, as Story says,

“With Tara's help, we were able to bring the elements together. She gave us a road map based on other states' experience in using GSN, so I didn't have to reinvent the wheel. She also initiated monthly conference calls with my MEP colleagues, so we could compare notes and learn from each other. And she educated the University of Missouri's Extension Service on how the GSN elements work together. It's made a huge difference.”

Through INEAP connections, Jimmy Story was able to get encouragement from several government program managers. He also received additional assessments from DOE (which provides them at no charge to companies) and learned how to seek additional funding from EPA to help defray the cost of environmental assessments.

The biggest winners of all are the fifteen manufacturers that are current Missouri MEP clients. Getting lean, clean, and energy efficient helped them to become more profitable and save on the cost of the assessments. Having the assessments rolled into one also cut the downtime of going through each assessment separately. Most important, integrating the assessments helped them save energy and improve the air quality of the plant. For more on GSN, go to [www.greensuppliers.gov/gsn/home.gsn](http://www.greensuppliers.gov/gsn/home.gsn).

## Local INEAPs

Learning about other programs available for the same clients inspires the national INEAP members to encourage collaboration at the local level. For instance, the MEP in Colorado heard about INEAP from program-level members. Colorado MEP staff members started to work together and realized that they would be more efficient using staff members trained in all the programs to offer seamless counseling to the small companies they serve in their state. The MEP contacted Colorado's Economic Development Office about developing a local INEAP or “L-INEAP.” It was encouraged to seek funding and has put in a proposal for specialized training for a small staff that would represent the various technical and business assistance programs available in Colorado.

For the Colorado MEP and other technical assistance programs, having staff members collocated would cut down on administrative costs. Moreover, it would help businesses take advantage of all the assistance avail-

able to them, in an integrated way. For instance, a small manufacturer could

- ◆ set up an appointment to have the local Small Business Development Center help with financing issues,
- ◆ learn how the Colorado MEP could help implement Lean Six Sigma to become more efficient, and
- ◆ get assistance in learning how to market products to the Department of Defense from the local procurement technical assistance center.

## Problems and Solutions

Leading a diverse, large, and informal network is no easy task, and several issues have emerged. A contractor learning about INEAP warned that partnerships usually face three big challenges: cash, credit, and control. INEAP and its leaders are aware of these issues—and more—and have worked hard to address them. The subsections that follow describe the strategies they've used.

### Cash

Joining INEAP requires no financial commitment. Thus far, most expenses have been in kind, handled by NIST MEP and the programs hosting the monthly meetings, but INEAP's high activity is demanding greater resources and soon will require more than the contributions received from member agencies. On the other hand, the fact that agencies and offices can join INEAP at no cost has been one of its success factors: joining the partnership has no drawbacks, not always the case with collaboration. The need is for more than funding: often the most important resource needed is time to handle the various INEAP administrative tasks. The new executive core council is starting to meet that need, developing policies and procedures that will help to evenly distribute these tasks.

### Credit

Because INEAP has been so active, it has many results to report, but which member organizations should be recognized when it puts out a press release? Some don't want to be mentioned in the media because their involvement in INEAP is politically sensitive at the local level, and they need to keep a low profile. Starting small and building slowly has allowed for minor achievements that have been able to navigate the credit issue and helped to clarify goals that also define credit sensitivities.

## Ownership and Control

Given its early success and rapid growth, many people want to own INEAP and pursue their own agenda. That, of course, is a mixed blessing. Dealing with varying agendas is a challenge, but it can also be positive if it means that people value the partnership and develop a stake in it. Also, some private-sector groups think it is too federally oriented and that more private associations should be represented.

Rotating INEAP meetings has enabled members to contribute resources as needed, encouraged shared responsibility for meeting agendas, and contributed to a strong ethic of shared control.

## Trust

Trust is a prominent issue for many collaborative initiatives. Transparency was practiced by INEAP's founders at the outset, largely by modeling an open communications style. For instance, they informed the members of their budget histories for supporting small businesses and encouraged others to do the same (many did). They openly discussed some of the problems they were having in their own operations with the field offices of some INEAP members, which encouraged others to engage in the same way. The members who joined INEAP in early 2006 quickly picked up on this openness, and it has created a high level of trust as new people join.

Trust is a function of consistency. As new members join, they are exposed to an atmosphere of trust and openness that excites them. When they experience that atmosphere meeting after meeting, they see that it's genuine and contribute to the openness and trust. At a recent executive core council meeting, Stephen Covey's new book *The Speed of Trust* was given to each member by one of the founders to demonstrate the importance of trust.

## Finding Time

Supporting and leading the partnership takes an enormous amount of time, due, in part, to the large number of established relationships. The leaders know investing time is key in relationship-building efforts and communicating these relationships. This groundwork allows the members to contact someone with whom they have an established relationship, cutting through the normal red tape of government-structured stovepipes.

In addition, each meeting requires preparation to pick appropriate themes and involves time-consuming follow-up afterward. “All INEAP members do this work on their own time,” Doss notes. “Nobody’s boss directs the members to participate.” That’s testimony to the partnership’s attractiveness. It’s also a risk: if the members’ managers have no stake in INEAP, they may not approve of the amount of time their subordinates put into the partnership. Happily, every INEAP member’s supervisor has seen the value of this partnership and has supported the investment of time.

### Maintaining Continuity

Two people perform much of the INEAP work. “Carroll is really the glue that keeps everything together,” Doss says. “I do a lot, but she’s critical to our success. So we need to develop an infrastructure to keep things moving if she (or I) can’t continue contributing at this level.” The recently created council will not only expand the number of people who feel ownership of the group, but will encourage succession planning for de-

veloping a new generation of leaders to assume some of the workload and continue efforts into the future.

### Conclusion

Jean Monnet, an early champion of the European Union, once said, “Rien n’est possible sans les hommes, rien n’est durable sans les institutions” (“Nothing is possible without men; nothing is lasting without institutions.”) His point is that any initiative, no matter how large or small, inevitably relies on a few key individuals to get started. After these early champions demonstrate the effort’s potential and achieve early success, they must build structures and institutions that outlast the individual. INEAP leaders well understand Monnet’s comment and are moving to create more structure and shared leadership for INEAP. They also understand that the early champions of an initiative are far more likely to succeed if they forge strong relationships, because without them and the trust they engender, there will be no successes to publicize.



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