

The reality of ongoing turnover and recruiting costs to businesses and organizations affects the bottom line on a daily basis. It is something that human resource departments and organizations as a whole must address if they are to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Ruth Weirich sites in her book, *Workplace Stability*, that research in 2004 predicted “the value of hourly and lower-wage employees to many organizations is only expected to increase in the future... In order to stay competitive in an increasingly global economy, employers will need to hire, train, and retain entry-level personnel.”¹ The results of this environment not only affect the bottom line due to the costs of turnover, but also the degradation of morale and corporate culture, which is negatively affecting the workplace.

Companies that are able to retain the best employees in this market set themselves apart as “the best places to work,” improving productivity among employees, and significantly improving their bottom line. In addition, human resource departments that are able to retain employees are then able to direct their attention to training, development, and continuous improvement efforts among the companies’ most important asset: *people*.

Employer Resource Networks

Improving Job Retention Through
Private–Public Partnerships

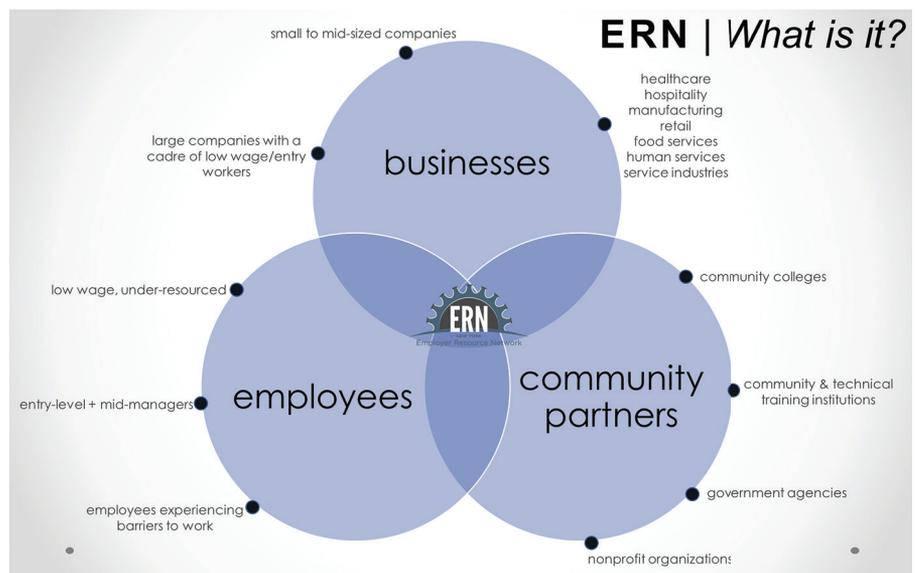
By Nathan Mandzager and John Saccocio



I ♥ my
job

Understanding the realities of the targeted workforce, which primarily affect the entry-level positions within a company, results in Employer Resource Network (ERN) members significantly improving the retention of employees. When an employee is living in daily instability outside of the workplace, their work may not be their primary focus. Instability is caused by a number of things, depending on the individual, but the most common issues are related to child care, reliable transportation, stable housing, family crises, and food scarcity. “Studies show that stress and dissatisfaction at work negatively impact relationships and parenting style. At the same time, stress and concerns at home can negatively impact work performance. Both need to be addressed by attaching families to necessary work supports including transportation, child care, and ongoing job counseling and case management.”² Employers need their workforce to be focused, engaged, and “present” in order to maintain productivity, excellent customer care, and workplace safety. Additionally, employees that are distracted by extra-work issues are less likely to develop into long-term assets to the company because their focus is not workplace success but daily survival.

For any individual in the community, a host of resources needs to work



together for positive results and impact to happen. Often, for those who come from under-resourced communities and live in daily instability, just having a job and showing up to work is a major victory. Employers, on the other hand, cannot grow their company on “presenteeism”; they need fully engaged, loyal, and developing employees to grow their business in this competitive marketplace. Adding to this dilemma is the reality that individuals coming from this environment are entering into a workplace that functions on different social norms (hidden rules) and expectations. Where survival in a particular neighborhood leans more on relationships and “who I can respect,” the workplace is built on systems, procedures, formal language, and policies that are designed to build the company as a whole. These differing paradigms about how the world works result in “collisions” that inevitably leave under-resourced, unstable employees terminated or on the verge of losing their job. No one wins when this happens—not the employee, the manager or supervisor; the company, the neighborhood; nor the public human service system.

employer-based program that establishes consortiums of small to mid-sized businesses or employers (often diverse in both size and industries) to provide job retention services, help with barrier removal, and offer work supports and other opportunities for employees to help them succeed at work and at home. The primary stakeholders of the ERN—the member companies—pay a shared, low fee to secure a Success Coach on-site at their company to provide fast-track, confidential barrier-removal for their employees. This workplace-based employee success coaching—targeting the employees who are most under-resourced, unstable, and highly stressed—results in real-time connections to community resources, allowing these employees to overcome the weighty problems outside of work that affect their productivity in the workplace.

In addition to sharing the services of a Success Coach, these businesses/members meet regularly to discuss how to improve employee performance, common workforce challenges, benefit programs, and the best ways to utilize the ERN to enhance their respective businesses, employee retention, and employee satisfaction. As an example of ERN-organized activities, the members of one Schenectady Works ERN were hearing monthly reports from Success Coaches that there was significant employee stress around the holiday season due to lack of time and resources



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What is an Employer Resource Network?

Consortium of Businesses

Employer Resource Networks (ERNs, see chart above) are a solution to the ongoing problem of workforce retention and productivity. The ERN concept originated in Michigan as an innovative,

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to purchase toys for children. One of the strategic community partners at the table worked with ERN employers to mobilize an “added benefit” toy store for employees of ERN members. Coalescing donations of new toys, volunteer support, and the real-time work of Success Coaches, made it possible for more than 120 employees to “shop” for toys for their families as a benefit of working at their job. Other ERNs around the country also have performed such collaborative work as getting public transportation routes changed to better serve their collective workforce and leveraging the strength of the ERN members to create a third-shift child care option for ERN employees.

Success Coach

The Success Coach assists employees in three ways: coaching, advocating, and connecting. As a **coach**, the Success Coach can assist employees with things such as: financial literacy (budgeting and choices), communication skills, conflict resolution, social and professional expectations, and understanding the policies of the employer (such as progressive discipline). As an **advocate**, the Success Coach can work alongside an employee to navigate a challenging or intimidating situation, such as those involving utilities, the IRS, or the Department of Education. Finally, as a **connection**, the Success Coach can connect the employee with community and government agencies that are positioned to assist with issues such as food resources, domestic violence, Medicaid, and other social services.

The Success Coach is available to work with employees and businesses to help employees with a vast array of difficulties—both work related and

“Our employees are more productive because we are caring for them better.”

—MANUFACTURING CEO

Implementation in New York

Schenectady Works, a division of the City Mission of Schenectady, was established in 2013 with a mission to empower individuals and businesses through innovative partnerships designed to remove barriers and enhance workforce success. Schenectady Works has established a number of programs, including the Employer Resource Networks mentioned here. Under the umbrella of the City Mission, Schenectady Works serves as the fiscal and administrative agency that oversees the development and growth of ERNs in the capital region and manages the Success Coaches, while also serving as the primary development consultant for ERNs as they begin to scale across the state.

Utilizing Other Employee Benefits

As Success Coaches build trust with employees in the workplace as a confidential resource, other employer benefits and programs become “tools in the tool belt” for the coaches. For example, some employers offer both Success Coach services as ERN members as well as **Employer Assistance Program (EAP)** services. Often EAP and other employee benefits are under-utilized because these are abstract benefits that do not meet the targeted employee’s needs in the concrete “now.” But as Success Coaches build trust with employee groups, they are able to direct employees to EAP services when necessary. For example, one employee came to his Success Coach due to time and attendance issues. As the Coach began to ask some questions it became clear that depression and suicidal thoughts were very real issues for this employee. After explaining to the employee what EAP services could offer (professional counseling, referrals to better care, etc.), the Success Coach was able to make the initial phone call alongside the employee to EAP, which began the employee’s counseling support. Since that time the employee has not missed a day of work.

Whether it be EAP services, policies and procedures within a business, wellness plans, retirement, time off, or other issues, the Success Coach utilizes all as viable resources to assist individual employees.

personal. The Success Coach seeks to meet with the employee (face-to-face, if possible) to define any problems and to find options for solving them. Optimally, the employee plays a major role in working through the problem at hand. When this occurs, the benefits are often shared by the employee, the employee’s family, the business (which gains a more focused employee), and society at large (which profits from the productive employment of its citizens). Additionally, the Success Coach must navigate, on any given day, face-to-face confidential interactions with employees, discussions with managers or supervisors, updates and strategies with human resources, and collaborations with any number of outside agencies and services.

The Success Coaches that are employed through the ERNs of

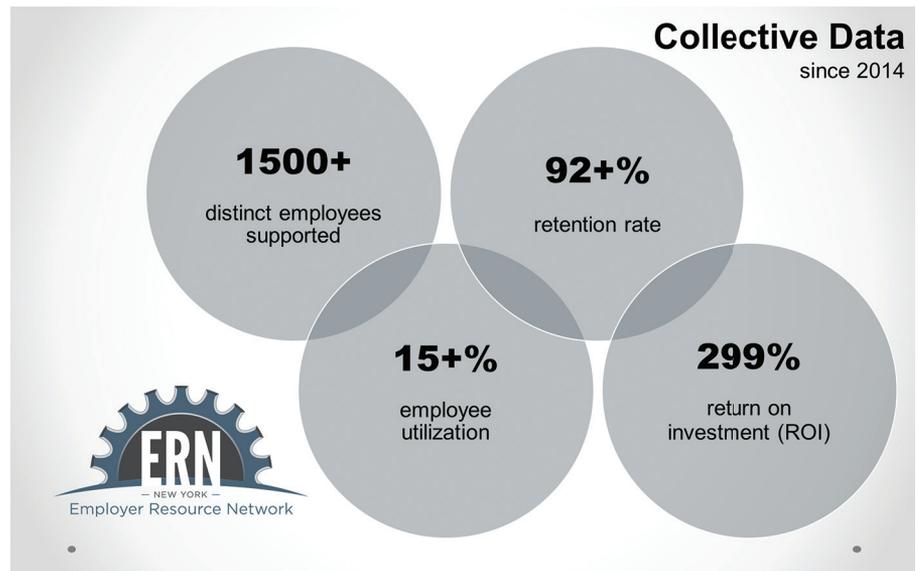
Schenectady Works (five currently) have been selected based on their experience in the corporate world, their capacity to function in a dynamic, ever-changing work environment, and their desire to work alongside employees and businesses for long-term success. Understanding this background, the City Mission invests time, training, and effort in mobilizing the Success Coaches to navigate the world of human services, community resources, and agency programs. Most of the Success Coaches have stepped into this job with a focus on the mission to serve employees and businesses, not primarily for the paycheck. This has allowed Schenectady Works to utilize well-seasoned individuals who are often in the second half of their careers and looking to make a direct impact on the lives of individuals.

Results and Impact

The Schenectady Works ERNs have—since February 2014—grown from 5 businesses and 1 Success Coach to 3 networks, 30 businesses, and 5 Success Coaches. This growth is a direct result of providing a cost-effective employee benefit that generates tangible and meaningful results. To date, every business has retained its ERN membership while half have increased their share of a Success Coach. This innovative model for providing success coach services, documenting efforts and results, partnering with outstanding businesses, community organizations, and governmental agencies constitutes a framework of private–public sector partnership that has the potential to positively impact the local workforce. 

Reference Notes

1. *Workplace Stability*, by Ruth Weirich, aha! Process 2016
2. “A Whole-Family Approach to Workforce Engagement,” by Kerry Desjardins, *Policy and Practice*, April 2016. American Public Human Services Association.



“The Success Coach offers personalized supports to our employees ... Stronger employees means stronger teams, and stronger teams create a stronger business.”

—HR REPRESENTATIVE

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