

CASE STUDY: PATHWAYS TO INCLUSION

The STC navigates equitable engagement in legacy manufacturing

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Growth Institute (EGI) at the University of Michigan leverages resources, research, technologies, and expertise to foster innovation and create positive economic impact for local, state, and national communities and economies by working with small and medium-sized enterprises toward a vision of equitable economic growth.

The EGI plays a critical role in the GEM Coalition, working with small to medium sized legacy manufacturing companies in the 11 counties that comprise the Detroit region, through the Supply Chain Transformation Center (STC). Their objective is to partner with those manufacturing companies, supporting them to transition from suppliers of the combustible engine auto manufacturing sector, to suppliers of the emerging and growing electric vehicle sector.

The complexity involved in accomplishing this goal cannot be understated, considering factors such as the longstanding history of manufacturing in this region (and both its cultural and social links to the traditional auto industry), the need for trust-building among manufacturers, the challenges related to the change process itself, as well as the challenge of truly understanding the concerns and the needs of the many diverse stakeholders.



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IMPORTANCE OF EQUITY AND INCLUSION

In December, 2023, members of the EGI, including Ashlee Breitner, Managing Director at University of Michigan, Economic Growth Institute, participated in an introductory Equity Sequence® workshop convened by the GEM Coalition’s DEIJ Officer, Jeannine Gant, and facilitated by Tidal Equality’s Dr. Kristen Liesch.

Given the EGI’s priority of ensuring equitable economic growth in the region, bringing an equity-focussed lens is in keeping with their goals. While capacities across the group are varied, each contribute in unique ways to this equitable intention. They have team members with research expertise in equitable economic growth, and their industry members focus on listening to and learning from the constituents in the field. As a collective, their efforts are geared toward meaningful outreach and engagement, aiming to ensure available supports and resources are put in front of their intended audiences.

Specifically, they gather self-identification data in their application forms - which they endeavor to make as simple as possible - so they can map out (across a diversity of demographics) who the STC is serving and not serving - yet. Additionally, the STC is supported by an Equitable Outcomes Advisory Board. The Board is comprised of different representatives - from economic development, business, and regional representatives - whose perspectives can help shape the STC’s work.

In spite of their purpose and efforts, the EGI recognizes that - like all organizations - they face particular challenges when it comes to operationalizing their equitable vision. In particular, a challenge they’ve identified is ensuring that legacy manufacturers in historically excluded communities (HECs) have equal awareness of and access to the resources the STC aims to provide them.



Ashlee Breitner (she/her)
Managing Director, University of Michigan,
Economic Growth Institute

“We have to be very intentional about getting in front of them and making them aware of our resources, as opposed to just expecting they’re going to come across our path.” (Ashlee)

1. Quotes in this case study have been edited for clarity.

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APPLICATION OF EQUITY SEQUENCE®

During the introduction to Equity Sequence® workshop, Ashlee, Stephanie, and colleagues from the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center - Ingrid Ty and George Singos - applied the equitable innovation method to this very challenge, and asked themselves, “How can we innovate our process of outreach and engagement with stakeholders in HECs?”

Specifically, they applied the Equity Sequence® to their direct outreach plan, which has been in place since the start of the GEM project and, by many measures, producing positive outcomes for a great number of legacy manufacturers. However, as the group worked through the Equity Sequence® framework, they gained some valuable insight that, at its root, came down to representation and trust-building.

“While EGI and MMTC have diverse teams, our STC pillar staff- its project managers, outreach team - is not representative of that diversity. And yet they have been tasked with engaging manufacturers all over the region, including in HECs. We realized it might be possible that we weren’t engaging as many stakeholders in HECs because they didn’t see themselves represented in the folks doing direct outreach, and that was a missing piece in our trust-building. We know that it’s critical to build a trusting relationship with these companies.” (Ashlee)



Stephanie Ludwig (she/her)
University of Michigan,
STC Program Director

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INSIGHTS AND PLANS FOR CHANGE

Through the Equity Sequence® exercise, the EGI and MMTC team uncovered some potential equitable innovations to their outreach plan that, if implemented, could result in greater engagement with companies in HECs.

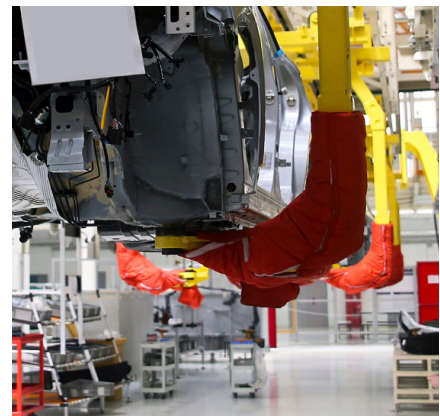
“We could bring along trusted community partners.” Is one idea that Ashlee shared. STC has already identified and established a successful referral network (although the team conceded that it could be further expanded to deliberately include partners with stronger ties to HECs), but there is an opportunity to engage that existing network in a more meaningful role in the operations of the outreach itself, from communications drafting and dissemination, to the practical day-to-day efforts of their boots-on-the-ground team visiting legacy manufacturers across the region - particularly in HECs.

“If our outreach representatives showed up in company offices accompanied by community and industry partners who our target stakeholders already trust, that might be beneficial in engaging a group that might be feeling hesitant about engaging with the STE team, or participating in the transformation in the first place.” (Ashlee)

Stephanie Ludwig, STC Program Director didn’t have the opportunity to attend the December session, but was briefed by her team and deepened their analysis, sharing how another idea that emerged intersected with stakeholders once they’d already entered the EGI ecosystem.

“We could engage the companies who are already accessing our resources and supports, and ask them to tell us ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’ about their experiences with our processes, systems, etc.” (Ashlee)

The team identified that feedback from companies who had taken a first step toward engaging with the STC, but then elected to not apply might have some important insight about the value they did or didn’t find as they navigated the systems and processes that are part of the STC: “We need to ask: ‘Why haven’t you taken next steps?’ and not make assumptions.”



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IMPACT AND LESSONS LEARNED

In stark terms, Stephanie Ludwig STC Program Manager explained the stakes that are at play when the STC members consider these initial opportunities for equitable innovation.

“If we lose the supply chain in Michigan, we’re in trouble.” (Stephanie)

Her statement reflects the fact that the region’s manufacturers are, today, so uniquely attuned to the needs of the combustion engine automotive industry, that if they a) simply bow out of the opportunity to serve the electric mobility revolution because they haven’t been meaningfully engaged in the case for transformation and supported in the work, or b) are not supported in ways that address their specific needs and concerns, the electric mobility revolution may not be one that achieves its full potential in the Detroit region. Considering that region’s deep and invaluable expertise and capacity, such an outcome would be a terrible loss.



However, on the flip side of that dire concern lies an exciting alternative scenario, were the STC to lean into the insights the Equity Sequence® practice delivered. Namely, to seize the opportunity to deepen and innovate their engagement tactics with companies in HECs.

“The biggest impact of that would be that, when we reach these new people, they can also help us open up a whole new network, so they can spread the potential impact of STC’s support and resources, and also share their learning and insight with us.” (Ashlee)

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IMPACT AND LESSONS LEARNED

cont'd

The experience of applying the Equity Sequence® reinforced how there's still work to be done to ensure the STC accomplishes its mission, and equitable innovation will play an important part:

"We've done similar processes in supply chains for 40-odd years, but this exercise showed us there are exciting opportunities to innovate and make sure we meet the needs of all those we're working to serve." (Ashlee)

Furthermore, the Equity Sequence® method was relevant to the group's work, and effective in equipping the group to bring fresh thinking to many more processes than the one they practiced the method on at their initial workshop.

"I liked applying Equity Sequence® to something we were already working on, and to use the Sequence of questions to challenge our thinking in a new way. If we hadn't gone through those questions, I don't think we would've identified the challenges and opportunities that we did; and it's got us thinking in new ways about the other work we're doing in other spaces." (Ashlee)



CONCLUSION

Like the many teams representing the pillars of the GEM coalition, the STC team recognizes the opportunity to better understand and meet the needs of their many diverse stakeholders, and that equitable innovation can help them do that. And, like Stephanie, many are invigorated by the possibility that presents, and inspired by the Equity Sequence® framework to ask:

"What can we change next?" (Stephanie)

RESOURCES

[Economic Development Institute](#)
[Ashlee Breitner](#)
[Stephanie Ludwig](#)
[GEM Coalition](#)
[Tidal Equality](#)
[Equity Sequence®](#)

