 MEP Advisory Board Committee on Technology Acceleration

Implementation Plan

May 2015
Acknowledgements

NIST MEP wishes to express gratitude for the generous insights and feedback shared by:

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Technology Acceleration Implementation Plan
For presentation to MEP Advisory Board May 19, 2015

Background

The MEP Advisory Board convened a Committee on Technology Acceleration (ABCTA) at its meeting in September 2014. The charge to the Committee is to:

Provide Board guidance to shape MEP’s Technology Acceleration strategy and activities, which contribute to the MEP mission of enhancing the productivity and technological performance of U.S. manufacturing.

NIST leadership and the Advisory Board recognized that there is increased focus on and high expectations for MEP as a network to deploy new technologies to America’s manufacturers. Senior Administration officials and recent research reports (including the Advanced Manufacturing Partnership 2.0, the Milstein Commission Report, and others) articulated roles for MEP to play. Broadly, they envisioned MEP aggressively and systematically supporting the Administration’s innovation agenda, providing outreach, education, and engagement support to Manufacturing Institutes, and collaborating more formally with Federal labs including those at NIST, the Department of Energy, and others.

These expectations are totally consistent with Congressional intent and the MEP mission. MEP’s statutory authority says: (§ 278k TITLE 15—COMMERCE AND TRADE Page 615-616)

“...The objective of the Centers is to enhance productivity and technological performance in United States manufacturing through— (1) the transfer of manufacturing technology and techniques developed at the Institute to Centers and, through them, to manufacturing companies throughout the United States; (2) the participation of individuals from industry, universities, State governments, other Federal agencies, and, when appropriate, the Institute in cooperative technology transfer activities; (3) efforts to make new manufacturing technology and processes usable by United States-based small- and medium-sized companies; (4) the active dissemination of scientific, engineering, technical, and management information about manufacturing to industrial firms, including small- and medium-sized manufacturing companies...”

During the early stages of MEP system development, the Centers initially found that most small manufacturing enterprises (SME) clients were not ready for cutting edge technologies coming out of labs. Instead, they generally required more basic or foundational assistance related to lean processes, quality, and other services to improve efficiency. More recently, building on a solid foundation, SMEs appear well-positioned to adopt new technologies to enhance process improvement and product development efforts.

MEP has provided technology-related services to SMEs since inception. The MEP services have included: helping increase SMEs’ awareness about new technologies and their business implications; identifying and deploying new technologies to solve problems or gain competitive advantage; guiding SMEs through
the sometimes-daunting path of federal labs and universities to extract, adapt, and deploy relevant research, and; supporting SBIR awardees to address manufacturing challenges. These services have received varying levels of support over time, vary widely in their availability across Centers, and are sometimes reactive instead of strategic. The ABCTA is tasked, in part, to help NIST and the MEP system to systematically identify priority actions that will reduce barriers and increase incentives for MEP Centers to engage in Technology Acceleration activities, promote greater adoption of new technologies in SMEs across the nation, and generate a high return on investment.

To satisfy the Board’s charge, the Committee set out to identify sources of relevant information, and collect and analyze data as the basis for developing a Technology Acceleration Implementation Plan based on thorough review of the research, available services, SME needs, and Center capabilities. This Implementation Plan, with its recommendations, along with the supporting documentation and analysis in the Background Report, articulate the input that the Committee considered in developing the strategy that will guide development and deployment of Technology Acceleration services in the MEP system.

The Committee will present this Plan for consideration by the full Board at the May 2015 meeting.

Work Plan
A Work Plan to develop this Implementation Plan was presented to, and approved by, the MEP Advisory Board on January 21, 2015. The Work Plan included four major task areas as follows:

- Setting the Foundation
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Evaluate Actions/Investments
- Develop Implementation Plan

NIST MEP staff and the ABCTA have engaged MEP Center leadership and other experts as a reality check to ensure that the activities under each task area are grounded in operational reality and provide a solid basis for informing future actions and investments. Toward that end, NIST MEP has:

- Engaged MEP Center leaders in structured conversations to explore and assess various strategies, services and approaches that could inform the MEP Implementation Plan for Technology Acceleration.
- Identified options for deployment of products, services, tools, or education throughout the network, including utilization of pilots, with subject matter experts; and informed/validated findings through informal Center Focus Groups convened based on the experience. The options include internal Center staff delivery, external partner delivery or a mixed internal Center/external partner training, mentoring, and support for complex projects.

Setting the Foundation
MEP defines Technology Acceleration broadly as integrating technology into the products, processes, services and business models of manufacturers to solve manufacturing problems or pursue opportunities and facilitate competitiveness and enhance manufacturing growth. Technology Acceleration spans the innovation continuum and can include aspects of technology transfer, technology
transition, technology diffusion, technology deployment and manufacturing implementation. The ABCTA agreed to this definition at its January 2015 meeting.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection and analysis tasks were intended to develop an understanding of the current state of the MEP System and its partners and stakeholders with respect to Technology Acceleration. This included developing a baseline understanding of current activity level (depth, expertise profile and business models) for Technology Acceleration projects, better understanding of the barriers to adoption of technologies by SMEs, better understanding the barriers and attitudes within the MEP System to developing and deploying Technology Acceleration-related services, and beginning to build a more refined listing of sources of technologies relevant to SME growth and the time frames over which they can be usefully accessed. Specific tasks included:

The data collection activities made use of multiple methods to understand the nature and extent of Technology Acceleration activities and services provided by the MEP System or its partners. The ABCTA and NIST MEP engaged in data collection as follows:

- Inventoried Center activities using consistent templates.
- Engaged Centers via the MEP Regional Managers in direct discussions with Center Directors and via collection of feedback from the November, 2015 Nashville System Update Meeting panel sessions.
- Convened a Center Leadership Team to consult on findings and to develop deeper understandings.
- Explored current and potential partners engaged in Technology Acceleration and related activities at other agencies and organizations.
- Surveyed the field of technology sources and has listed potential sources of technologies that are relevant to SMEs.
- Conducted a literature search of studies that discovered and characterized barriers that prevent SMEs from adopting new technologies.

The research team explored the possibility of mining Client Project Data for trends regarding project type, firm demographics, project size, partners and impacts; however, based upon an initial review of the data, we determined that the cost of significant additional time to clean and analyze data outweighed the benefits of doing so, and as such, terminated the data mining effort.

The data analysis activities enabled the ABCTA and NIST MEP to explore service areas and specific services needed and valued by manufacturers which MEP could develop and deploy. It also revealed the systematic barriers within the MEP System that need to be overcome for Centers to actively engage in assessing, selling, and delivering TA projects. Specific tasks included:

- Organized and analyzed data coming available from the various sources cited above.
- Developed a value proposition logic model for Center engagement in TA activities.
- Developed a compilation of the barriers that impede SME adoption/adoption of new technologies and mapped which of these barriers MEP can address in near- and mid-terms as well as those which are outside the scope of MEP.
- Developed an understanding of the potential role that MEP could play in supporting SMEs with adopting/adapting technologies.
- Developed an understanding of the current practices across the MEP System that have implications on Center engagement in TA activities and impede the realization of system’s potential role.

**Evaluate Actions/Investments**

Using the knowledge gained in the first two task areas above (Setting the Foundation and Data Collection and Analysis), the ABCTA and NIST MEP evaluated current conditions, opportunities to exploit, and barriers that contribute to a system that is sub-optimized for Technology Acceleration engagement. The evaluation took into consideration all the analyses of data and information gathered from the multiple sources which represent perspectives of the SME, the Center, and MEP System policies. The ABCTA and NIST MEP carefully engaged in the following steps toward the goal of developing this *Implementation Plan*.

- Balancing priorities among competing demands and defined focus areas for Technology Acceleration activities and incentives.
- Aligning MEP Technology Acceleration activities and existing structures of MEP Centers.
- Considering potentially-available funding needed to implement any particular recommendation.
- Considering modification to the current Center performance measurement system as well as the cost-share requirement.

**Develop Implementation Plan**

Based on the Setting the Foundation and Data Collection and Analysis activities and the outcomes from the Evaluate Actions/Investments effort, ABCTA and NIST MEP have developed this *Implementation Plan* that integrates the Findings and Recommendations into strategic and tactical plans for development and deployment of Technology Acceleration services throughout the MEP system. The plans have been developed to include:

- Priority areas for activity and investment, including Identification of specific activities and services to be developed and delivered.
- Methods for building Center capabilities to sell and deliver the services, e.g., content development, training, and mentoring by content experts.
- Communications strategies/tactics to ensure uptake by the MEP system and the manufacturing community.

The ABCTA will present this Draft Implementation Plan to the full MEP Advisory Board for approval during its meeting on May 19, 2015.
Key Findings

Developing an effective Implementation Plan to advance a Technology Acceleration agenda within the MEP System required data collection, analysis, and subsequent evaluation. It was critical to analyze the readiness of the system to evolve from its current state toward a robust system that can support SMEs in the identification, deployment, and adoption of new technologies. A full documentation of the data collected and their analyses is available in the MEP Advisory Board Committee on Technology Acceleration: Background Report.

The following outlines the key findings from the full analysis.

1. There are many products, services, and activities currently available to some extent within the MEP system that support TA. These services are in various stages of maturity and are practiced to varying degrees of engagement among the Centers. Some of these have been developed through MEP system strategic investments and deployed through a variety and mix of mechanisms including partnerships, contractors, pilots, and most critically Center participation tailored to optimize the quality and depth of service. The many TA services that connect SMEs with needed resources or assist SMEs in TA activities include the following commercialization assistance services: Product Design and Prototyping; Lean Product Development; Design for Manufacture (DFM) or Assembly (DFA); Machine and Equipment Design; Strategic Business Development; Supplier Development; Quality Management and Control, and; Technology Scouting and Technology Driven Market Intelligence. Recent investment to stimulate additional TA activities include the Manufacturing Technology Acceleration Center (M-TAC) and Business-to-Business Network Pilots. The level of engagement and impacts from these commercialization assistance services is challenging to assess given the methodology for Center reporting to NIST.

2. The graphic in Figure 1 provides one view of the position of the MEP System within the TA ecosystem and denotes the spectrum of TA scenarios in which MEP could participate. There are many barriers that SMEs face throughout the process of identifying, developing, commercializing and integrating new technologies into the SMEs’ products and operations. Of these barriers, some may be addressed by MEP solutions or via partnering referrals and opportunities, some exist beyond the authority or capability of MEP, and some may be addressed by amplified and/or complementary solutions. Further, there are diverse types of organizations that produce technologies which can be adapted or adopted by SMEs. Those technologies can be at various stages of development and require different intensities of services to make them ready for adoption. The translation of the value proposition for any technology is perhaps one of the most complex barriers that impede TA and one in which MEP could play a critical intermediary role.
3. MEP Centers work within a complex environment and rely on having a viable business model that make sense for each Center, its partners, staff, funding sources, and market. The following graphic identifies factors that impact an MEP Center’s ability to conduct Technology Acceleration activities. These interdependent factors must be balanced against other MEP activities and properly incentivized in order to cultivate effective Technology Acceleration activities within the MEP System.
There exist certain conditions within the MEP System that unintentionally discourage technology acceleration practices at Centers. The following table identifies a few current practices within the MEP system that have been designed to promote a desired outcome but which have unintended consequences relative to Technology Acceleration practices. (One of the “practices” identified: the insufficient awareness of emerging technologies at the Centers is not by design, but rather it is an effect arising from the requirements on Centers to generate revenue/impacts/market penetration.) The table provides the current condition, or practice, the unintended consequence, and possible strategies that NIST MEP could undertake to encourage Technology Acceleration activities.
### Unintended Consequences of MEP System Practices with Implications for TA activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current MEP Practice</th>
<th>Unintended Consequence</th>
<th>Possible Alternative Strategy to Encourage TA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centers must generate significant revenue from SME engagements due to the 2:1 cost share requirement.</td>
<td>TA projects are often cost-intensive on their own right and additional fees to the Center often exceed what the SME can afford.</td>
<td>1:1 cost share (either in the short-term through re-competition of Centers, or through legislative change) could relax the imperative to generate project income via tactical “quick-hit” short-term rather than longer-term strategic projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative performance metrics currently track SME-reported results, including new/retained jobs, sales, investments and cost savings.</td>
<td>Impact measures drive engagements that result in near-term impacts at the expense of longer-term engagements that could generate more significant impacts.</td>
<td>New quantitative and/or qualitative performance metrics to capture and recognize TA activity could be developed to augment existing measure. Examples could include matches with tech sources, consultation on commercialization, training, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client surveys may be repeated or delayed to allow project impacts to materialize and capture.</td>
<td>MEP Centers often do not take advantage of opportunity to capture long-term impacts because of perceived ROI and challenge of attribution over long-term.</td>
<td>NIST MEP could evaluate return on investment for the longer-term impacts and if warranted develop strategies to promote practice at Centers of long-term impacts surveys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs of implementing MEP solutions are borne by SME.</td>
<td>SMEs may not pursue growth opportunities that MEP recommends for lack of available capital.</td>
<td>Strategic investments dedicated to fund TA project implementation (excluding fixed assets) could be made at the NIST MEP level to stimulate TA activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIST MEP asks Centers to expand their market penetration by increasing the number of SMEs engaged.</td>
<td>Opportunities are lost for SME growth through technology adoption. MEP Centers may be inclined to hand off referrals. Walking away from introductions to technology providers may result in a continuity gap among such MEP engagements with SMEs beyond initial connections to technology source to support manufacturability or business strategy.</td>
<td>NIST MEP could promote expansion of TA activity by enabling efficiencies through: promotion of national partnerships with technology sources; development and delivery of training to raise awareness and skills among Center staff about technological solutions; and facilitating translations of technology solutions for SME consumption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEP Centers have insufficient awareness of technological solutions and skills to undertake and sustain TA projects.</td>
<td></td>
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5. Specific feedback from Centers, not addressed in the unintended consequences discussion above, that directly affect their ability to engage in Technology Acceleration activities include:

- Challenges due to a lack of guidance and information available to their staff. Centers need information about the types of technologies and trends that could positively impact SMEs and they need access to those technology sources. The Centers asked for NIST MEP to provide supporting training material and best practices for how Centers effectively conduct Technology Acceleration practices.
- Centers want to learn about how other Centers are effectively engaged in delivering Technology Acceleration services and partnering with technology sources while balancing revenue streams and impact requirements. They asked for NIST MEP to help with sharing of effective practices.

The ABCTA and NIST MEP relied on evaluating these key findings to form the basis for the Recommendations that follow.

Draft Recommendations

I. Setting Priorities

1. NIST MEP should adopt a rubric of agreed-upon criteria for evaluating future Technology Acceleration opportunities, setting priorities, and investing and allocating resources.

*Description*: MEP is widely recognized as a valuable asset in our nation's efforts to deploy new technologies. As such, there are many opportunities for MEP to pursue, with limited resources. MEP should consider the following criteria to evaluate opportunities, set priorities, and allocate resources. These include, in no particular order:

- aligning with Administration priorities,
- aligning with NIST and MEP mission,
- tapping core strengths of MEP Centers and the MEP System,
- generating high return for low investment of resources,
- addressing key SME needs,
- identifying ready, willing and able partners,
- others?

*Organizational Lead*: ABCTA and NIST MEP  
*Deliverable*: Finalized list of criteria  
*Due Date*: June 1, 2015
2. MEP should give priority to developing and implementing Technology Acceleration opportunities with NIST Labs and National Network for Manufacturing Innovation (NNMI) Institutes over the next year, while also pursuing the emerging collaboration with DOE labs.

*Description:* There are a vast number of technology sources, from universities, to federal labs, and others identified in our research. This recommendation considers the criteria in #1 and recommends three focus areas for NIST MEP likely to yield the greatest impacts given resource, funding, and capacity constraints in the system as well as MEP authorization intent.

*Organizational Lead:* NIST (MEP, Labs and Advanced Manufacturing Program Office) and Centers that are engaging early with Institutes

*Deliverable:* Listing and descriptions of specific actions engaging MEP with NIST Labs, NNMI Institutes, and DOE Labs.

*Due Date:* Ongoing, with report back at September MEP Advisory Board meeting

II. Barriers and Incentives

Removing barriers and increasing incentives for MEP Centers to engage clients in Technology Acceleration activities are critical to generating greater technology-driven impacts among SME clients. Collectively, recommendations in this section are intended to enable Centers to make appropriate decisions to more effectively build their capacity to assess, plan and deliver TA services. With the objective of removing barriers and creating incentives for Centers to implement strategies that result in TA activities, the following recommendations focus on three categories of activities: reducing risk, performance measures, and professional development.

II.A Reduce Risk

1. The MEP system should work diligently to enable permanent change in the cost share requirement to 1:1 to reduce Centers’ risk of experimenting with Technology Acceleration services.

*Description:* The MEP Advisory Board has worked extensively over the last two years to study the issue of changing the MEP cost share requirement. The Board has concluded that it is in the program’s best interest to seek a permanent reduction in cost share from 2:1 to 1:1 and has taken steps to bring this change to fruition. One of the benefits articulated is that Centers would be more likely to experiment with new products and services, and to work with different and harder-to-serve clients that are less likely to generate revenue. The ABCTA anticipates that reducing the required cost share would remove risk among Centers of offering Technology Acceleration services to clients and address a persistent barrier.

*Organizational Lead:* MEP Centers, MEP advocates, partners and stakeholders, not NIST MEP

*Deliverable:* Legislation that permanently changes the cost share requirement from 2:1 to 1:1.

*Due Date:* as soon as Congressional action is feasible
2. NIST MEP should provide more competitive funding and, when available, supplemental funding, to Centers willing to experiment with Technology Acceleration strategies, tool development, and partner development.

*Description*: From time to time, NIST MEP publishes federal funding opportunities for Centers to engage in activities above and beyond their base operations. Typically the opportunities are related to development of new products and services and/or to encourage new partner development. Depending on availability of funds, NIST MEP should plan for strategic program development initiatives to be led by MEP Centers that specifically focus on advancing Technology Acceleration products, services and practice across the MEP system. These efforts should include sharing information about building the system’s capabilities, finding mechanisms to sustain TA activities beyond the NIST strategic funding, and sharing lessons learned across Centers. In addition, NIST MEP has provided some Centers with “supplemental” funding for Centers to use on activities that promote mission attainment. This recommendation calls for NIST MEP to use both the Federal Funding Opportunity (FFO) and supplemental funding vehicles to advance the Technology Acceleration practice across the system.

*Organizational Lead*: NIST MEP advised by the Technology Acceleration Working Group

*Deliverable*: FFO to provide funds to Centers to develop Technology Acceleration products, services and practice across the system.

*Due Date*: During FY 16, depending upon availability of funds

II.B. Professional Development/System Learning

1. Develop an 18-month systematic plan for learning across the MEP system that would include education on new technologies, their implications, and Technology Acceleration strategies employed by Centers.

*Description*: NIST MEP should develop a systematic plan over the next 18 months to educate Center staff on a broad range of Technology Acceleration issues. The plan should:

- focus system learning efforts on cross-cutting technologies (e.g., additive manufacturing, digital manufacturing including cybersecurity, etc.) with broad impact as identified by OSTP and other authoritative sources;

- engage technology sources (e.g., federal labs including NIST and DOE, NNMI Institutes, and the Federal Lab Consortium) to help MEP field staff know what technologies and resources are available;

- incorporate collaboration with Manufacturing Institutes’ funded research projects to identify outcomes that include content or lessons learned that can be deployed to develop MEP Center staff capabilities and promote SME growth opportunities;
• use a variety of vehicles and venues to share information, including webinars, quarterly updates, the 2016 MEP National Conference, a Community of Practice, and other opportunities;

• include information to help Centers understand business models, including how to assess, scope, sell and deliver projects that generate revenue and client impacts; and

• recognize that centers are in different places regarding their approach to technology acceleration, and provide information to help Centers define a strategy for providing increased technology acceleration services aligned with their capabilities and business plans.

Organizational Lead: NIST MEP P-PDO working with System Operations team  
Deliverable: A plan for system learning through Fall 2016.  
Due Date: Report back at September 2015 Board meeting

2. Launch a Technology Acceleration Working Group to encourage peer-to-peer learning and build relationships that strengthen the network.

Description: NIST MEP has employed working groups on a variety of topics for the last 20+ years. Typically, the working groups foster peer to peer learning, encourage relationship building across Centers, and inform NIST MEP activities and investments with insights from practitioners in the subject matter area. This recommendation suggests that NIST MEP launch a Technology Acceleration Working Group to build on the work of the Center Leadership Team and continue to support this work.

Organizational Lead: NIST MEP Partnership and Program Development team and the Center Leadership Team for the ABCTA  
Deliverable: A charter and initial membership roster for the working group along with a plan of proposed activities for the first year.  
Due Date: Ongoing but report back at September Advisory Board meeting

II.C. Performance Measures

1. Review MEP Center performance measures to explore quantitative and qualitative options for capturing impacts or other ways for acknowledging Centers’ work as they engage in Technology Acceleration activities.

Description: In coming months, NIST MEP is undertaking a review of the current system-wide performance measurement system. ABCTA recommends that, as part of this review, NIST MEP consider incorporating additional quantitative and qualitative options for capturing the work that Centers do to promote adoption of technologies in their manufacturing clients.
**Organizational Lead:** NIST MEP  
**Deliverable:** In the context of the overall review of MEP performance measures, produce specific recommendations of ways in which MEP Centers can receive credit for their Technology Acceleration work with SMEs.  
**Due Date:** Upon completion of the review of MEP performance measures (December 2015)

2. As the MEP performance measures seek to increase Centers’ ability to articulate their own metrics, work with Centers to encourage and assist in developing useful metrics for Technology Acceleration activities.

**Description:** In addition to system-wide metrics, NIST MEP intends to give Centers additional flexibility to propose and capture data on performance metrics that are especially relevant to their business. This recommendation asks NIST MEP to provide guidance and examples to Centers about individual Center metrics that capture the work that Centers do to promote adoption of technologies in their manufacturing clients.

**Organizational Lead:** NIST MEP  
**Deliverable:** Specific examples of individual Centers’ performance measures documenting Technology Acceleration impacts based on Center work  
**Due Date:** December 2015 – Summer 2016
III. Scale-Up and Sustainability

1. **NIST MEP should work with Centers to consider formal options for how to best stay informed about the growing number of cross-cutting technologies and emerging opportunities in order to fully engage and leverage the value of the MEP Centers.**

**Description:** There are many “game-changing” technologies emerging from a wide variety of technology sources as documented in the research. Staying abreast and making informed choices about which have most value for the MEP system and SME clients is difficult given the level of activity and opportunity. The current ad-hoc nature of NIST MEP’s and Centers’ engagement with technology sources and emerging technologies cannot handle the volume or pace of opportunity efficiently or effectively. Moreover, the status quo doesn't leverage individual Centers' relationships with regional technology sources and experts for the benefit of the entire system. Considering a variety of options to set strategic directions and manage the process is critical. Such options might include:

- Determining individual contact(s) for agreed-upon game-changing technologies – either at NIST MEP and/or at one or more Centers. Contacts would act as system experts, referring agents, and conveners of inquiries to understand overall demand and needs with each technology.
- Identifying and designating individual MEP Centers with expertise in a particular technology or manufacturing process (e.g., additive manufacturing or roll-to-roll production) or supply chains (e.g., Medical devices or food processing) as a “Hub” Center or “Center of Excellence” that could serve as a system resource and assist with delivery of services throughout the network.
- Designating MEP Centers located near technology sources (e.g., university or federal lab or commercial entity) to serve as “scouts” for the system to identify new technologies ripe for deployment.

**Organizational Lead:** NIST MEP working with the Technology Acceleration Working Group

**Deliverable:** A plan for designating staff and/or Centers as expert resources in individual emerging technologies. The plan should take advantage of existing relationships and expertise and seek to disseminate that across the system as appropriate.

**Due Date:** December 2015