A POINT OF VIEW FROM REVBY

THE FUTURE OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Doing More with Less: A Framework for Building Stronger Small Businesses in an Era of Constrained Public Investment

> "The future of technical assistance will not be defined by how many businesses receive guidance. It will be defined by how many businesses permanently improve the way they operate."
>
> Michael Aparicio, Founder and CEO

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Why Technical Assistance Must Change

Economic developers have entered a new era.

Public resources are tightening. Grant dollars face increasing competition. Communities are being asked to generate measurable outcomes while navigating economic uncertainty, workforce shortages, technological disruption, and growing expectations for accountability.

At precisely the same time, small businesses are carrying unprecedented complexity.

Business owners must manage inflationary pressures, workforce recruitment, cybersecurity threats, digital transformation, access to capital challenges, procurement requirements, and the emergence of artificial intelligence, often without dedicated staff or specialized expertise. Federal Reserve research continues to show that many small firms face persistent operational and financial challenges while seeking growth opportunities. [1] [2]

The traditional model of technical assistance was not designed for this environment.

For decades, many programs measured success through activity:

Businesses served	Workshop attendance	Consulting hours delivered	Satisfaction surveys completed

These metrics remain useful.

But they no longer answer the question that funders increasingly ask:

> Did the business become stronger, increase capacity or improve capability?

Economic development organizations can no longer afford programs that transfer knowledge without building capacity and capability.

The future belongs to programs that help entrepreneurs implement meaningful change by improving financial management, strengthening operations, increasing resilience, and creating systems that continue generating value long after technical assistance concludes.

At Revby, we call this ***Applied Technical Assistance***.

> Small businesses represent 99.9% of U.S. businesses and employ approximately 46% of the American workforce, making their health critical to local economic prosperity. [3] [4] The challenge facing economic developers is not serving more businesses. The challenge is creating greater economic impact from every dollar invested. That requires a different definition of success.

A New Definition of Success

Traditional technical assistance often asks:

What did participants learn?

Applied Technical Assistance asks:

What permanently changed inside the business?

Did financial reporting improve?

Did pricing become more strategic?

Did cash flow become more predictable?

Did the business qualify for financing?

Did management systems become stronger?

Did the owner's confidence improve because better systems existed behind the business?

In other words:

> Did capacity and capability increase?

That distinction changes everything.

Because outcomes, not participation, are becoming the currency of public investment.

> ***Concepts Inform. Implementation Transforms.***
>
> Most business owners do not struggle because information is unavailable.
>
> They struggle because implementation requires time, structure, accountability, expertise, and the muscle memory for ongoing reinforcement.
>
> Applied Technical Assistance bridges that gap.

The Revby Applied Technical Assistance Framework

ASSESS

Diagnose before prescribing.

PRIORITIZE

Focus resources where they create the greatest return.

IMPLEMENT

Complete meaningful work, not simply provide guidance or recommendations.

REINFORCE

Build muscle memory for good business practice, accountability, and confidence.

SUSTAIN

Leave systems that continue generating value after engagement ends.

Not every entrepreneur requires the same intervention.

Some businesses need strategic guidance. Others need financial systems. Some need capital readiness. Others need sales processes, workforce planning, or operational controls.

The objective is not to deliver equal hours.

The objective is to deploy the right assistance at the right time to create the greatest long-term business capacity and capability.

This shift from uniform service delivery to strategic investment will define the next generation of technical assistance programs.

Traditional Technical Assistance vs. Applied Technical Assistance

Traditional TA	Applied TA
Delivers information	Builds capability
Measures participation	Measures business outcomes
Equal service for all	Right-sized support
Workshops are the destination	Workshops begin the journey
Focus on activity	Focus on implementation
Ends with advice	Ends with lasting systems

> "Economic developers do not create stronger communities by funding more technical assistance. They create stronger communities by funding technical assistance that produces measurable business capacity and capability."
>
> Alex Lee Berlin, Finance and Strategy Consulting Manager - Revby

The Growing Return-on-Investment Challenge

Economic developers face a fundamental question:

How can impact increase while resources become more constrained?

Historically, technical assistance programs emphasized scale. The objective was to reach as many businesses as possible.

While understandable, scale alone does not guarantee outcomes.

A workshop attended by 100 entrepreneurs may create awareness. But awareness alone rarely transforms a balance sheet, improves profitability, or strengthens organizational resilience.

Funders increasingly expect evidence that public investments produce measurable economic outcomes. That expectation reflects a broader shift toward performance-driven economic development.

Communities want to know:

Are businesses growing?

Are jobs being retained?

Is access to capital improving?

Are businesses becoming more resilient?

Are owners making better decisions?

Will the business be here five years from now?

The future of technical assistance will increasingly be judged by answers to those questions.

The Capability Gap

The greatest challenge facing most small businesses today is not a knowledge gap.

It is a capacity and capability gap.

Most owners understand that they should:

Track cash flow	**Monitor profitability**	**Improve marketing**
Document procedures	**Prepare for financing**	**Adopt new technologies**

The challenge is converting intention into execution. Economic developers see this every day. An entrepreneur attends a workshop. They leave inspired, but then reality returns. Their customers need attention. Employees need supervision. Invoices need processing. Operations consume available time.

Months later, little has changed. The problem was never motivation. The problem was implementation capacity. Applied Technical Assistance addresses that reality directly.

Rather than simply teaching best practices, it helps businesses install them.

Designing Technical Assistance for the Next Decade

If economic development organizations are preparing programs for the future, several design principles matter.

1

Measure Outcomes, Not Activity

Activity is easy to count. Outcomes are harder. But outcomes create value.

Future-ready programs should track indicators such as: Revenue growth, Capital access, Financial readiness, Operational improvements, Technology adoption, Job growth/retention, and Business resilience.

These measurements create stronger accountability and clearer evidence of impact.

2

Prioritize Readiness Over Eligibility

Many programs focus primarily on eligibility. A business qualifies based on geography, industry, demographics, or size. Those criteria remain important. However, readiness often determines success. It can also undermine success.

Businesses prepared to implement change typically generate stronger results than businesses that simply qualify for participation. The future lies in understanding both.

3

Blend Education with Execution

Workshops remain valuable. Training remains important. Education should not disappear. But it should not be the finish line. Education should become the starting point for deeper engagement.

The highest-performing programs increasingly combine: Learning, Coaching, Implementation support, Accountability, and Measurement. Together, these create durable outcomes.

4

Create Systems Instead of Dependency

The ultimate goal of applied technical assistance is not to create long-term reliance on advisors. It is to create self-sustaining businesses.

Every engagement should answer one question: When assistance ends, what remains?

If financial systems remain, value remains. If operating procedures remain, value remains. If performance dashboards remain, value remains. If only advice remains, impact often fades.

Technology Changes the Equation

Artificial intelligence and digital tools are reshaping expectations across every industry. Small businesses are no exception. Federal Reserve research has documented growing interest among small firms in adopting AI to improve productivity, communications, analytics, customer service, and operational efficiency. [5] [6]

Yet technology alone is not the solution.

Technology without process

often creates confusion.

Technology without training

often generates abandonment.

Technology without implementation

rarely produces results.

The real opportunity for economic developers is helping entrepreneurs integrate technology into stronger business systems.

Applied Technical Assistance creates the bridge between innovation and adoption.

A New Role for Economic Developers

The role of economic development is evolving.

For decades, many organizations functioned primarily as providers of information and connections. Those functions remain essential. But today, economic developers have an opportunity to become capacity and capability builders.

Capacity and capability building means helping businesses:

Make better decisions.

Improve operations.

Strengthen financial management.

Increase resilience.

Accelerate growth.

Prepare for future challenges.

In this model, applied technical assistance becomes more than a service. It becomes a strategic investment in the long-term competitiveness of a community.

The Future Is Not More Assistance

The future is better assistance. Communities do not prosper because entrepreneurs attend more workshops. Communities prosper because businesses become stronger.

Economic resilience is built one capable business at a time.

The organizations that lead the next decade of economic development will be those that embrace a simple but powerful shift:

1

From information to implementation.

2

From activity to outcomes.

3

From advising to capacity and capability building.

4

From temporary support to lasting systems.

That is the future of technical assistance. And increasingly, it is the future that funders, communities, and entrepreneurs will demand.

> "The most valuable technical assistance program is not the one that serves the most businesses. It is the one that leaves businesses permanently better equipped to succeed on their own."

Sources

1. U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, Frequently Asked Questions About Small Business 2024 and 2025 Small Business Profile. Small businesses account for 99.9% of businesses and approximately 46% of U.S. employment. **7** **8**
2. Federal Reserve Small Business Credit Survey and related reports documenting small business performance, financing, operational challenges, and technology adoption trends. **9** **10** **11**