



THE RII COMMUNITY TOOLKIT

As more and more rural communities consider how they can develop their own digital economy ecosystems, we have built this toolkit to outline the process required to be successful in this journey.

If you haven't already reviewed our model for creating a digital economy ecosystem, we recommend starting there.

[Explore our Model](#)

The toolkit contains four tools geared toward communities developing new or additional efforts as part of their approach to support digital and innovation-based jobs.

- **Readiness Assessment:** This document will help you evaluate the areas where your community should consider expanding your efforts, based on the elements of our model.
- **Asset Mapping:** This is a quick approach to assessing assets and stakeholders in your community and who should be included in your efforts.
- **Strategy Template:** This template walks you through developing your community's overall strategy and connecting the key areas it should address, with the partners and team to address the key areas.
- **Action Plan:** This template will help you track your progress. Though many of these tools exist, our communities have found this template effective.

Though these tools are primarily targeted toward communities that have budding efforts to grow digital and innovation-based jobs, communities at all stages of ecosystem development will find them valuable.

This toolkit is evolving and new tools will be posted over time. If you're looking for something in particular, please contact us.



RII Digital Economy Readiness Assessment Tool

This assessment tool will help you identify which elements your community should prioritize as you develop your strategy and begin to implement your approach.

While the strongest digital economy ecosystems implement efforts supporting all of the 12 elements, most communities start with a subset of these elements.

No matter where a community starts, each will benefit from actively pursuing an approach to build digital and innovation-based jobs.

Assessment Framework

Use the assessment framework below to evaluate the status and maturity of each digital driver and foundational element in your community, and to evaluate the remaining gaps needed to develop the full impact of creating a digital economy ecosystem.

As you complete the assessment, the identified growth opportunities and strengths will inform your community priorities.

One approach to set your community strategy and longer term vision with this scorecard:

1. Prioritize area(s) where your gaps are limited, where the community can achieve quick wins to build momentum and show observable change in the community.
2. Focus on the opportunity areas that your community feels are most critical to achieving your success, while laying the groundwork and removing blockers for more challenging elements of the ecosystem.
3. Set the long term strategy to address those items that you may not be able to address immediately, as well as the structures to ensure your community returns to these items in the future.



Evaluating Direct Drivers

Evaluate the direct drivers on a scale of 1-3, relative to how much opportunity there is for your community to grow and accelerate these efforts. If there are no existing efforts in your community related to one of these drivers, then that is likely a critical priority area for your community.

1 - Critical growth opportunity to address

This driver has seen little to no development in our community, and is a clear opportunity.

Example: There are few or no digital jobs present in our community and there have been no active steps to develop these.

Example: Due to critical failings in our broadband service, it is a challenge for local businesses to provide digital services.

2 - Developing strength to pursue

This driver has seen partial development, but gaps remain to capitalize on its full potential.

Example: Our anchor employers provide 200-300 jobs involving software development skills in our town, but they are beginning to move or source these jobs elsewhere due to the lack of talent and support locally.

3 - Core strength to amplify

This driver is strong in our town and has seen significant development. We should rely on this to catalyze other efforts and drive our programs forward.

Example: Due to a local philanthropy, our community has available capital, but it is invested outside of the town due to a lack of local opportunities. This organization is engaged in our effort and excited to change that pattern.



Evaluating Foundational Elements

Evaluate the foundational elements relative to how these elements hinder or enable the potential of the direct digital drivers above.

Some of these elements are likely well developed and will serve as the key elements for your community as you build the programming of your direct drivers.

Some elements may have particular weaknesses that will act as barriers to the success of your overall initiative until they are addressed.

Foundational elements are evaluated on a scale of 0-3 for their capacity to accelerate or slow efforts to develop the main drivers of a digital economy.

0 - Blocked or unavailable for now

Due to structural or situational issues, this element is outside of the scope of this project, or we are unable to address it at this time.

This may be due to a lack of perceived opportunity due to unique community issues, or an organizational constraint that prevents us from pursuing this element.

Example: Due to structural issues surrounding our potential broadband infrastructure, building out fiber internet to the home is not possible at this time.

1 - Critical roadblock to digital ecosystem

This structural element is lacking or has significant gaps, severely impacting our ability to implement direct digital drivers

Example: Due to recent social changes it is generally unsafe to spend time downtown in the evenings. This has exacerbated business closings, causing merchants to look elsewhere. Few community members want to be downtown, much less start businesses in these spaces.

2 - Minor gaps impacting ecosystem

We have certain strengths here, but key gaps are identifiable.

Example: We have two new microbreweries that are starting to build energy downtown, but limited development toward coffee shops or restaurants to keep this energy throughout the day.



Evaluating Foundational Elements (cont.)

3 - Core strength driving digital ecosystem

This element is strong in our town and has seen significant development. We should rely on this to catalyze other efforts and drive our programs forward.

Example: Our downtown has managed to keep a stock of housing that is in good condition and attractive to the younger members of our community. Though retail businesses have shuttered, many still live in downtown apartment buildings and above the remaining establishments, providing a base of energy for redevelopment efforts.



Evaluating Direct Drivers

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Direct Drivers	Definition	Score
Digital workforce development & support	<p>Communities need training, education, and skilling programs that provide workers with digital skills that are attractive to employers (e.g., coding, computer assisted drafting, graphic design). Support services (apprenticeship programs, soft-skills training, shared work spaces, etc.) are also important to smooth the transition to digital work, particularly in low-income communities.</p> <p>Workforce development programs can also have important cultural effects, creating success stories that inspire students and other members of the labor force to pursue digital-economy opportunities.</p>	
Access to digital jobs	<p>Communities need to be able to connect capable workers with opportunities. This requires them to have a sufficient mix of locally-based digital employers and remote work opportunities plus a mechanism (e.g., online job board) to push those opportunities to job seekers.</p>	
Entrepreneur support & incubation	<p>To ensure local startups and entrepreneurs are attractive investment opportunities, communities need to provide mentorship, access to expertise, and training resources to support entrepreneur success. This generally takes the form of an accelerator or incubator.</p>	
Access to capital	<p>Attractive startups need to be connected with potential investors, either within or outside the community. Communities need to leverage their networks as much as possible and work with other communities to create a brand and scale to attract capital.</p>	
Coworking, networking, and social spaces	<p>One of the hallmarks of innovative urban digital economies is the synergy created by shared space, density, and networking. We believe this is equally crucial in rural areas and that digital workers and startups benefit greatly from the networking, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing created by a shared physical environment. We also see access to physical space as a critical piece of enabling remote work and startups; workers need locations outside of the home to be most effective in digital employment.</p>	



Evaluating Foundational Elements

Evaluate the foundational elements relative to how these elements hinder or enable the potential of the direct digital drivers above. Some of these elements are likely well developed and will serve as the key elements for your community as you build the programming of your direct drivers. Some elements may have particular weaknesses that will act as barriers to the success of your overall initiative until they are addressed. Foundational elements are evaluated on a scale of 0-3 for their capacity to accelerate or slow efforts to develop the main drivers of a digital economy.

Foundational Elements	Definition	Score
Attractive “live-work” downtown	Digital economy participants display strong preferences for having affordable, attractive housing, quality workspaces, and retail close together in a downtown core. A consolidated downtown district combining residential, commercial, and entertainment options is crucial in attracting and retaining digital workers and employees.	
Culture & entertainment options	Digital economy participants also display strong preferences for viable entertainment options. Rural places do not need to have world class entertainment and cultural institutions, but they do need “something to do after work” to help build community and keep digital workers from leaving for cities.	
Quality K-12 education focused on digital skills and STEM	<p>Strong elementary and secondary education in computer science and other digital-related fields is critical in both attracting digital workers and employers and ensuring there is a pipeline of local talent that can be made ready for digital jobs with limited additional training.</p> <p>Communities should strive to have educational outcomes above state averages in digital-related fields (e.g., computer science), and invest in key programs and faculty. Schools should also work with community members to create co-curricular options (robotics, coding leagues) that further student interest in and development of digital skills.</p>	
Broadband infrastructure	Like the railroads and highways of previous generations, internet infrastructure allows rural communities to participate in the larger economy. Digital and remote jobs require fast, affordable, and reliable internet that can only be provided by broadband (and, ideally, by fiber). Communities will need to have this high-speed internet infrastructure in place before being able to access digital jobs.	

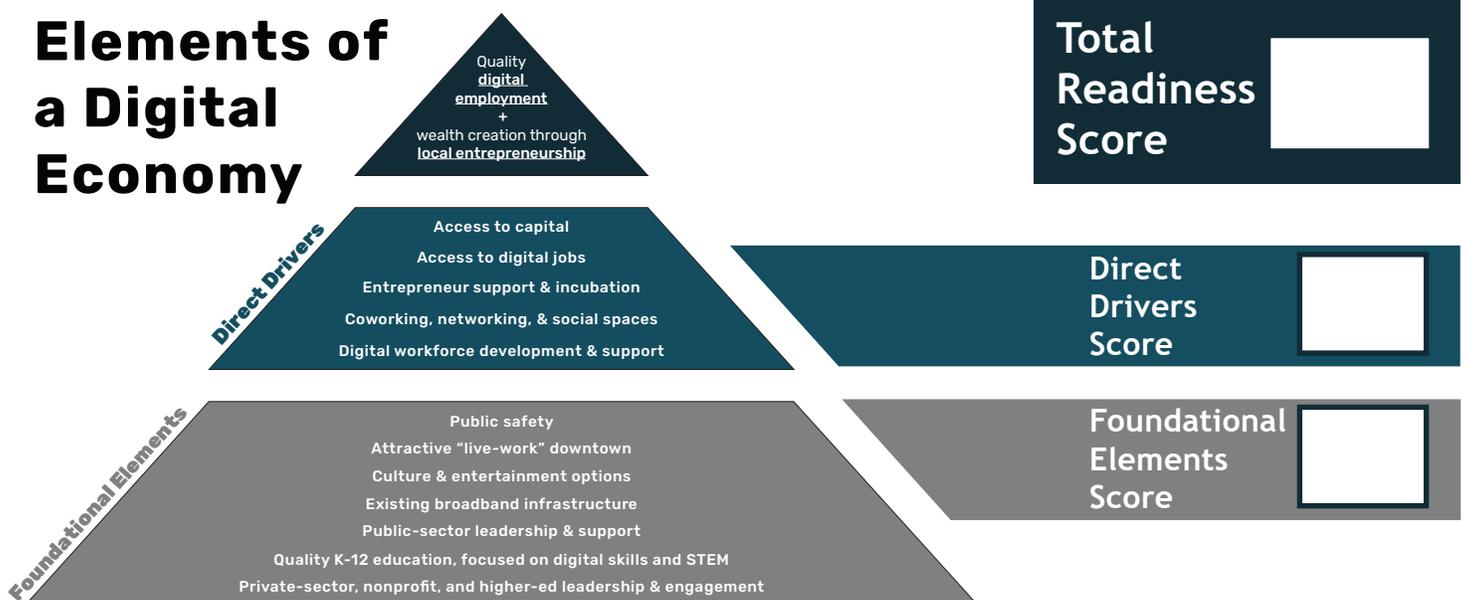


Evaluating Foundational Elements (cont.)

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Foundational Elements	Definition	Score
Public safety	The perception of a community as a safe and comfortable place to live is critical to attracting employers and retaining talent. It is also important in unlocking the full potential of the local workforce. Communities should invest in remedying any actual issues or perceptions of being less safe than the norm.	
Community leadership & engagement	Building a digital economy requires focused and coordinated effort by a broad array of stakeholders. Community organizations and leaders must be “bought-in,” as they will be important sources of expertise, funding, connections, and programming.	
Public-sector leadership & support	As with any large-scale economic development effort, building a digital economy will require the support of the public sector. Governments represent an important source of funding, can help coordinate the various moving pieces of a digital economic transformation, and are instrumental in the educational, training, and placemaking strategies that are crucial to building a digital-ready workforce.	

Elements of a Digital Economy





Mapping Your Community's Key Assets

As you develop your community's strategy to support a digital and innovation-based rural economy, it's critical that your community takes an approach that incorporates your existing strengths. Each community we work with has its own unique assets that shape and enable a uniquely local effort.

This template is designed for you to map your community's relevant and available assets. This is a companion piece to your community's strategic plan, and will help you identify the key partnerships you need to be successful.

What is an asset map?

An asset map is an inventory of all the relevant attributes within your community or region that could be leveraged to support your strategy.

The idea is to uncover the talents, skills, and resources already in the community or connected to the community so that you can focus your efforts on connecting and aligning those resources to accomplish your vision. There is no "right" group of partners to include in this effort, but the process will help you determine which partners and assets to prioritize.

Why create an asset map?

An asset map allows you to work from a position of strength, leveraging the positive efforts, people, organizations, and infrastructure already present in your community, as opposed to focusing on deficits or resources outside of your community.

Ideally, an asset map will help you see possibilities and build connections and relationships that otherwise might not have been pursued, and increase your likelihood of success. It can help you prioritize the partnerships, programming, and services you want to develop, and inform your communications and marketing strategy.

Demonstrating this deep understanding of your community's assets is critical for many funding opportunities. For example, the [Regional Innovation Strategies i6 program](#) historically emphasizes that applicants must demonstrate their engagement of regional strengths, capabilities, and competitive advantages. This federal program values projects that build structures engaging a variety of public and private sector investments in broadband and digital connectivity, transportation, education, and beyond.



For this program, and others, you'd need to have a coherent and compelling proposal that shows you are leveraging particular assets in your region in your approach to build digital and innovation-based jobs.

How do you create an asset map?

First, define the geographic area (region) you want to cover.

Second, determine whether you want to focus on identifying assets that are relevant to a particular component (e.g., entrepreneurship, live/work amenities, digital economy talent and companies). This focus should tie back to the overall strategy you've developed.

Third, decide who you want as contributors to your asset map. If you have several people working together to create the asset map, consider a working session in front of a white board or with sticky notes. This template provides categories you should cover, though each community may uncover unique and different assets. Whether you build your inventory on a whiteboard or in this [asset mapping spreadsheet](#), the idea is to organize your asset map in a format that allows you to prioritize which assets you want to leverage and which partnerships you need to solidify.

[Download Mapping Spreadsheet](#)



Developing Your Community's Strategy Document

To set the stage for a successful community development effort, your strategic plan needs to be clearly-communicated and well-defined. It also requires synthesizing your ideas to create a shared vision and strategy with a clear execution plan and projected outcomes. This will make it much easier to build support and focus your efforts. The plan will form the foundation of future grant applications, pitch decks, and presentations. It will be the core component for securing funding, planning your efforts, and maintaining a clear focus throughout the project.

This strategy template outlines the key concepts that will guide you forward, toward the goal of promoting entrepreneurship and innovation-based jobs. The major sections included are similar to those needed in any strategic plan, and are not unique to efforts focused on rural digital innovation. Your community may find it valuable to include sections not found in this template in your own plan; however, well-developed strategic plans should include at least all the components below.

Major Components of a Strategic Plan

1. **Vision** - Describe how your community and region will be different as a result of your efforts to promote

entrepreneurship and innovation-based jobs.

Write a single sentence or a full paragraph.

2. **Mission** - Explain the big idea or goal that is driving your team, and why what you do will lead to this future outcome.

Write one to two sentences.

3. **Challenge and Opportunity** - Describe the gap that exists in your region. Describe the problem you aim to solve and the opportunity you see.

Write one to two paragraphs

4. **Approach** - Synthesize the major areas your team is working on into three to four focus areas (e.g., attracting remote workers, supporting local entrepreneurs, harnessing and aligning existing efforts). Emphasize how these areas leverage the relevant assets and partnerships in your community. These focus areas should correspond to the key drivers and elements of a digital economy ecosystem that your team is focusing on.

Write an introductory paragraph followed by separate sections for each focus area.



5. **Team** - Describe the structure and membership of your leadership team. Who are the key players, and how does their expertise and experience set your community up for success? The goal is to show potential funders that your team has the leadership needed to ensure success.

Provide a 2-3 sentence summary for the experience and expertise of each key team member.

6. **Execution Plan** - Explain how you will execute your strategy to achieve results. For each focus area, include descriptions of key activities, relevant partners, and a timeline of these activities. This timeline should be a summarized version of your action plan.

Create a planning spreadsheet

7. **Success Metrics** - Identify key performance indicators (KPIs) for each focus area that will enable you to measure progress and know when you're achieving success. Include a mix of output and outcome measures, and use the SMART methodology.

Include three to five key KPIs and two to three sentences of description for each.

8. **Resources / Budget** - Provide estimates of the resources needed to carry out the activities you've identified as part of your strategy. Consider including costs for categories such as staff and personnel, educational programming and materials, rent and facilities costs, communications and marketing, equipment and supplies. Show estimates for each category by year.

Use a spreadsheet to detail these resources and the budget.

9. **Conclusion** - Briefly summarize why this team is positioned to make this happen now and what you will achieve. This section should act as the key point in your team's pitch. The point is to convince potential partners that your concept is achievable and that they should invest in working with you.

Write one paragraph, focusing on brevity



Creating an Action Plan

Community efforts supporting a digital and innovation-based economy will likely become a complex project involving numerous stakeholders working on different components. As with any large project, a frequently updated project tracker should be used to ensure tasks are assigned, aligned to key objectives, and tracked against the timeline. Numerous approaches and online platforms can be used to manage your project. It's more important to choose a tool and update it frequently than to be too concerned about choosing the “right” template.

The examples included in this template are generalized versions of priorities and tasks used by communities that are just starting their community development efforts. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive in any way, but to act as thought starters as your team develops your own action plan.

This template is meant to track your project after your team has completed a strategic plan, and mapped your community's key assets. We recommend completing the toolkit guides for these steps before starting your action tracker.

1. **Key Themes** - These themes should connect to the focus areas defined in your strategic plan.
2. **Team** - Each member of your working team should be included in your action planning, as linked to the team section of your strategic plan.
3. **Action Items** - Incremental actions should link back to each of your key themes and tie to your full working team in your strategy.

[Download Action Plan Template](#)