

Stronger Economies Together Participants' Guide
Supplemental Module: Growing Regional Economies by Growing Networks
Handout 1: Pleasant Valley Partnership Case Study **Slide 11**

The Pleasant Valley Region is a collection of three rural counties in the Midwest. A group of community leaders, the Pleasant Valley Partnership, had been working together to identify ways to grow their economy. The region has lost most of its manufacturing jobs, and the largest employers were the two rural hospitals, three school corporations, and one manufacturing plant that had survived.

The group previously worked with someone from a nearby university, looking at some occupational data to help them examine their assets. They were surprised to see that the region had more jobs in Information Technology than anybody realized. No IT business existed in the region, but upon closer examination, they realized that those IT jobs were imbedded in non-IT business. Both hospitals, for instance, had IT professionals who supported the hospitals' networks. Also, the school corporation had an IT person. Even the manufacturer had a couple of people who developed and maintained inventory and logistics computer programs. The group decided it might be a good idea to bring these individuals together, so they launched a "Tech Tuesday" event as an opportunity for those involved or interested in technology to meet one another. The Partnership set the event for late afternoon and also invited computer teachers from the local high school, encouraging them to bring along any juniors or seniors who might be interested.

Ten people attended the first Tech Tuesday. Although there was plenty of time for socializing, the community leaders also facilitated a group conversation exploring participants' backgrounds, current interests, and hopes for the future.

Out of that first conversation, some relationships began to develop and some new ideas began to emerge. One of those new ideas came about when two of the IT professionals, Brett and Lisa, learned that they shared an interest in youth soccer. Both had elementary-aged children, and both helped coach their kids' soccer teams. They also discovered that each, at one time or another, had wished they had more support in learning how to coach and that a smartphone application for soccer coaches could meet a real need. Their idea really began to take off, and over the next few weeks, the two began spending some evening and weekend time doing conceptual work on what an app might look like.

Members of the Pleasant Valley Partnership helped support Lisa and Brett with business plan assistance from the local small business development center and a microloan to hire two of the Tech Tuesday high school students to help with the early programming. One of the local Extension offices also helped connect them with a marketing professor at the state's land grant university, and a local attorney helped them set up an LLC for their new venture.

As the Pleasant Valley Partnership thought about what Lisa and Brett's new ventures, as well as other high-tech startups, might need, they realized that good broadband infrastructure was lacking in much of the region. They worked to secure a USDA-Rural Development grant to help leverage private investment to bring fiber optics lines to the three downtown districts.

Although Brett and Lisa both kept their day jobs, the midnight oil they had been burning paid off when the app was officially launched and quickly gained great reviews. Revenues for their app began to grow, and they resigned from their jobs to work full-time on developing new apps. Lisa and Brett rented and renovated a great loft space in one of the region's downtown districts, hired three people, and went to work on their next product. Their new office space also served as the new home of Tech Tuesdays.

The Pleasant Valley Partnership began thinking about how they could leverage this one success story to attract other high-tech boutique businesses. Their future plans include converting more of the downtown district, where Brett and Lisa have their business, into a business incubator.