

# Workforce Development Institute

## Teamwork Makes the IMT Dream Work

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*Longstanding relationships with employers ease WDI's effort to bring the Industrial Manufacturing Technician apprenticeship program to Michigan.*

Being a successful intermediary involves a long-term investment in relationship-building.

Take it from Walt Lodes Jr., operations and training manager at Michigan State AFL-CIO Workforce Development Institute (WDI) in Michigan.

In its nearly 40-year history, WDI has provided employment and training services to more than 60,000 unemployed and underemployed Michigan residents. A crucial component of the nonprofit organization's success is the effort it has put into forging close relationships with employers across the state.

The relationships are mutually beneficial. Businesses see WDI as a trusted partner they can turn to when they have hiring needs.

So when WDI had an opportunity to help implement the Industrial Manufacturing Technician (IMT) apprenticeship program in Michigan, it was able to draw on longstanding relationships to make it happen.

The IMT is a nationally recognized apprenticeship registered with the U.S. Department of Labor that trains frontline manufacturing production workers in skills needed by advanced manufacturers. The 18-month program trains workers to do the following:

- Set up, operate, monitor, and control production equipment
- Help improve manufacturing processes and schedules to meet customer requirements
- Understand manufacturing as a business system that integrates multiple disciplines, processes, and stakeholders
- Efficiently and safely manage time and materials

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To ensure that the IMT apprenticeship gains a secure foothold in Michigan, WDI business services representatives, such as Will Slone, promote the program among employers that WDI has worked with over the years. They also consider the relationships and origins of the businesses themselves. That's an effective approach because many manufacturers in Michigan have roots in countries such as Germany, where businesspeople have a deep appreciation for apprenticeship programs.

## Offering Help Every Step of the Way

One such Michigan business is Bleistahl North America, a Battle Creek-based auto parts manufacturer that's a subsidiary of Germany's Bleistahl GmbH.

Bleistahl first offered the IMT apprenticeship program to its employees in 2016, and WDI has worked with the company every step of the way, serving as the grant intermediary and also as a "phone a friend" support lifeline. "I tell every person that I work with—if you have a question, call me," said Lodes. "I may not know the answer, but I'll reach out to DOL or the grantee to get an answer for you."

For Bleistahl, WDI's support has been paying off. Of the company's first 2016 cohort of five IMT apprentices, four have received journeyworker certification and the fifth is close to completing the program. Another cohort of four apprentices is close to completion, and a third cohort of five began training in January 2020.

**"We have had great successes with our IMT apprentices," said Michelle Henderson, a human resources generalist at Bleistahl North America. Henderson noted that two of the journeyworkers began as unskilled laborers in Bleistahl's heat treatment area and are now team leaders who supervise the entire powered metal side of the plant. "Through their continued training, both on the job and in the classroom, they have advanced to one of the top leadership positions within the plant," she said.**

## A Recruiting Catalyst

One of the benefits of the IMT program is that it has proved to be a recruiting aid because it helped raise Bleistahl's profile among jobseekers. "We have had new hires who have told us during the interview process that they have heard that we are committed to our employees' improvement and personal growth through apprenticeships, and that has attracted new talent to us," Henderson said.

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In addition, Bleistahl leaders have seen job performance evaluations improve for employees who have participated in the IMT apprenticeship. The evaluations measure job knowledge, leadership skills, safety, and quality—all of which are topics covered in the IMT training.

## Stay the Course

Lodes credits WDI's continued close relationship with Bleistahl for the mutual success. But he acknowledges that even when WDI has an established relationship, introducing a new program such as IMT can still take years of discussion, collaboration, and demonstration before it is enacted.

**His advice? “Stay the course,” he said. “It’s a teamwork approach.”**

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