

LEADING THE WAY

Fort Wayne Metals Empowers Interns, Employers

By Symone C. Skrzycki



Many former interns, including these current team members, go on to full-time employment at Fort Wayne Metals.

“Wired for Success” is more than a clever moniker for the paid, project-based internship program at Fort Wayne Metals (FWM). It’s a philosophy that’s helping to fortify workforce skills and employment opportunities in northeast Indiana.

FWM is a manufacturer of precision wire-based materials for medical and demanding industrial applications. Approximately 30% of its interns go onto full-time employment with the organization.

The company has 1,000-plus employees at its corporate headquarters in Fort Wayne as well as in Columbia City and Castlebar, Ireland. Last fall, FWM announced an investment of \$51.1 million as part of plans to expand its Allen County operations, creating up to 337 new jobs by 2021.

Internship Program Manager Jordan Brockman started her career at FWM as an intern. She created an internship guide in 2016 to maximize internal operations and assist employers throughout the region.

Working with the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership – an economic development organization assisting in business expansion and relocation projects in an 11-county region – Brockman hosts employer workshops to share highlights from the guide.

“Oftentimes, people feel like they’ve got to create something on their own and there may be that feeling of, ‘Am I doing this right?

Am I on the right path?’ I’ve learned from mistakes – making changes along the way with our internship program,” she says. “I’ll never say we’re perfect, but what I utilize the guide for is helping others as they’re navigating and maybe thinking about making changes or adding an internship program.”

Brockman adds, “Something we talk a lot about at the workshops is, ‘If you guys have any suggestions or something you’re really proud of that you utilized through your internship program, we’d love to hear about it because I’m always wanting to continually improve our program as well.’”

Wired for Success breakdown (2004-2017):

Internships: 321
Students: 219
Rehires: 102
Full-time offers: 59

Beyond the basics

Jackson Walker, a mechanical engineering intern, has engineering in his blood.

“My dad does this same job,” he comments. “That’s how I got into the field. I’ve been working with him since I was really young – I want to say eighth grade or ninth grade.”

He gained even more knowledge at FWM (interns are assigned a mentor and a manager).

“I’ve always had that (guidance from his father), but it’s good to have someone (on the job) who’s constantly looking over your work. Not to critique it necessarily – that will come – but someone to lead you and show you what the best steps are for all of these different scenarios and give you real-world advice. Not as much textbook stuff.”

Although the majority of interns are engineering students (mechanical, engineering, biomedical), they also work in information technology, human resources, accounting, graphic design and more.

FWM’s internship guide covers recruitment, onboarding, development, social opportunities and evaluation. In addition, it contains sample forms.

“The employers that have reached out to me have liked the forms. To be able to drop their logo into it and take off running saves a lot of time,” Brockman remarks.

She emphasizes that internships boost the potential and talent of current employees.

“What I try to push and what our other managers try to push is that the mentors are typically people that don’t have leadership experience. I look at our internship program providing value not only to students’ lives, but also to our full-time employees because that’s a great way to test if you could be a good manager. Have an intern. See if you like managing people. Learn from this experience.”

Building confidence, camaraderie

Brockman challenges students to collaborate and problem solve.

“Last summer, they were asked to do a case study. Many of our interns were a little stressed at learning how to manage their time effectively,” she recalls. “I gave them kind of an ambiguous project to work on (versus clearly defined expectations).

“It was a good exercise in allowing them to make their own path, and take an arbitrary project and make it something more tangible. While I stressed them out a little and I’m pushing them to get out of their comfort zone, at the end of the summer, they can look back and say, ‘Wow! I learned a lot.’”

Working with the Regional Partnership, FWM offers social events (e.g., TinCaps baseball games, zip line adventures and

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Along with technical prowess, internships emphasize soft skills and building camaraderie.

bowling) throughout the summer.

“We recognize that not a lot of employers will have 40-some interns like we do at Fort Wayne Metals. So, what we’re kind of giving to the region free of charge is, ‘Hey, if you want to send your interns to learn

and to meet and interact with other interns in our area, send them!’

“We do a (monthly) professional development module,” Brockman observes. “It could be things around creating your personal brand or utilizing social media as a networking tool. Project management. Very broad topics that we think are relevant for today’s students, and growing and utilizing their experience to land that full-time job.”

Investing trust

The biggest mistakes employers make with interns, Brockman’s discovered, is not placing their full trust in them.

“Oftentimes, employers are shocked at the level of responsibility we give our students. But my way of explaining why I think that’s valuable is if you’re hiring someone (an employee) and put them on a really short leash, more than likely they’re going to be worried and stressed, and they’re not going to be able to perform well.

“(It’s the) same for interns! I find that if we give them responsibility upfront and give them the opportunity to learn and tell them – ‘It’s OK if you make mistakes. Just don’t make the same mistakes over and over again’ – that freedom ... (the notion that), ‘We’re giving you this opportunity. It’s yours,’ they take ownership and they’re invested in the outcome.”

RESOURCES: Jordan Brockman and Jackson Walker, Fort Wayne Metals, at www.fwmetals.com