

# TAPPING INTO TALENT

## Work and Learn Indiana Celebrates 25 Years

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

An axiom states that experience is the best teacher.

That concept – and an emphasis on relationship building – fuels Work and Learn Indiana (WLI), a work-based learning matching marketplace. WLI connects Hoosier employers from all sectors, anyone seeking such a learning experience and high schools, colleges and universities.

WLI was designed to help Indiana employers and community partners develop and retain Hoosier talent that drives a highly skilled workforce. In 2025, 460-plus new employers joined the WLI platform and more than 4,500 new students engaged with the system.

Originally created as Indiana INTERNnet (IIN) in 2001, the program is celebrating 25 years – with no signs of slowing down.

### Taking stock

The Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce (now Indy Chamber) initiated and operated the program in partnership with the University of Indianapolis. With continued funding from the Lilly Endowment, the organization was granted 501(c)3 tax exempt status in May 2004 and moved to the Indiana

Chamber, where it rebranded to Work and Learn Indiana in 2021.

Today, WLI is a program of the Institute for Workforce Excellence (IWE), a non-profit subsidiary of the Indiana Chamber that helps the state attract, develop and retain Hoosier talent by offering tools and resources for employers to use in building their talent pipelines.

“We’re continuing to evolve WLI to be able to meet the moment and to continue to advance technologically,” asserts Sally Saydshoev, IWE executive director. “We’re thinking about how do we automate some of these processes? How do we move into a space where there’s a lot of congestion?”

“I think what’s so significant and valuable for Indiana and the work we’re doing is – we’ve seen it all. WLI has a historic presence. It’s an archive and a wealth of needed information. How many other similar platforms have lasted this long? It’s outlived some of the others because it’s a well-oiled machine. They were ahead of their time in 2001 to be able to make this happen. I’m honored to be able to continue the work.”

She adds, “Internships are powerful. The employer’s perspective is that you want to find the right talent, train that individual and retain that individual to build your talent pipeline in a way that can be meaningful as well for the people that are training and working with them. You don’t know what (exciting things) that experience will lead to.

“And from the student perspective, not only do internships provide them with what you’d traditionally think of as the ‘world of

work’ and on-the-job training, but they also expose them to economic social mobility and can help them find out what they don’t want to pursue as a career. Internships are training grounds. These are young, newly minted professionals that need guidance.”

### Fighting the ‘brain drain’

IIN was formed as a response to the “brain drain” challenge in Indiana.

“We export a lot of postsecondary talent and they leave because they might not be aware of or knowledgeable about what exists in their backyard in terms of companies,” Saydshoev contends. “Exposing them to careers and internships not only connects them with the actual world of work, but also to a network that provides them with a world of opportunities for economic social mobility that not a lot of young people have.”

Pam Norman served as IIN’s first executive director.

“One of the greatest challenges any employer has is talent identification and retention. . . . Internship programs offer the pipeline to identify talent and on the other hand, help students see themselves thriving with their internship host company,” she emphasizes.

“I was part of the initial efforts involved with taking a programmatic workforce initiative and growing it into a stand-alone non-profit organization,” she recalls. “Internships had been around for some time by then, but finding those internships and connecting students with employers through a centralized,



Work and Learn Indiana (originally Indiana INTERNnet) has continued to evolve with employer needs. Its *Intern Today, Employee Tomorrow* guide is one of many resources available to organizations and learners.



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*Janet Boston,  
former executive director  
Indiana INTERNnet*

online matching portal was new to Indiana.”

Norman reflects on that pivotal transitional period.

“Fueled with funding from the Lilly Endowment and managed by the Indiana Chamber, Indiana INTERNnet grew exponentially during those first five years, increasing the numbers of employers offering internships and the number of students seeking internships,” she recalls.

“Ultimately, the number of matches made was our key metric. Housing the nonprofit with the Indiana Chamber gave our team access to Chamber members and provided opportunities to assist members with creating internship programs.”

### Expanding access

After Norman left her mark, Janet Boston joined IIN as executive director in 2011.

“The most utilized resource on the interactive Indiana INTERNnet website was the match-making component that allowed employers to search for internship candidates and students to search for internships,” Boston notes. “Students posted their résumés and other credentials to the site and employers posted their internships to the site. In addition, IIN worked with

employers to develop quality internships, recognizing that interns were able to perform substantial work – not just menial jobs. And employers were always strongly encouraged to pay interns.”

Boston observes that it was exciting to see experiential learning grow.

“Employers recognized that offering work-based learning experiences enabled them to recruit more qualified employees as well as offering the opportunity to provide management experience to existing employers,” Boston asserts. “And as more career development departments at colleges and universities recognized the importance of work-based learning in employers’ recruiting, the emphasis on internships and other work-based learning experiences increased. It also allowed students the opportunity to explore different careers before dedicating their studies to one curriculum and possibly changing course later.”

In 2007, the annual Impact Awards were launched to honor excellence in internships and mentoring.

“As awareness of the event increased, more and more employers participated and excitement grew over the competition,” Boston remarks. “The attendance continued to grow year after

year, and sponsorships followed.”

Another milestone for IIN was implementation of the Employment Aid Readiness Network (EARN) Indiana program in 2013. Employers with an approved internship can receive up to 50% of their interns’ wages from the state if they hire EARN Indiana-eligible students for a résumé-building, experiential, paid internship.

Initially available only for college students, the program expanded to include high school students in 2019. The initiative is administered by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education in partnership with the IWE via WLI.

### Cultivating the next generation of talent

Among new IWE programs is the WLI Resource Hub, a partnership with the Indiana Department of Education to help employers, educators and community partners navigate the work-based learning experience ecosystem.

“We’ve had almost 900 to 1,000 views a month, which is significant,” Saydshoev declares. “We’re excited about that.”

Continued expansion into the high school internship realm is another priority.

“Vendors are popping up to be able to support (these efforts) in high schools,” Saydshoev explains. “We’re committed to working with those vendors so it’s a more seamless process for employers. We’ve been working in the postsecondary space and have connected to platforms at places such as IU and Ivy Tech (for instance), but we haven’t really gotten into the high school space because it’s just taking off now.

“Technology is moving really quickly. The need for understanding how we build and support high-quality experiences across the state – and how we continue to build relationships with employers to inform them of how to access resources to make work-based learning a part of their talent development strategy – is vital,” she surmises.

“Work-based learning experiences are impactful for everyone involved. It takes time. It takes financial costs. It has to be the right fit, but it can be a win-win for all involved.”

**RESOURCES:** Work and Learn Indiana at [www.workandlearnindiana.com](http://www.workandlearnindiana.com); Institute for Workforce Excellence at [www.workforceindiana.org](http://www.workforceindiana.org)

## 20th Annual Impact Awards

When the inaugural Impact Awards were held in 2007, no one could have predicted the growth to come in work-based learning. But amazing efforts already were underway, evidenced by the extraordinary stories of internship and mentoring excellence honored at the event.

In the years since, the prominence and popularity of high-quality, experiential internships has exploded. Work and Learn Indiana (WLI) has led the way by providing access to innovative resources and key connections.

On February 12, 2026, WLI’s Work-Based Learning Conference in Noblesville took place featuring the 20th Annual Impact Awards. It honored the various employers and individuals that change lives and workplaces through experiential learning.

Who were the honorees and what are their accomplishments and passions? Find out in a *BizVoice*® online exclusive. Access the article starting February 13.