

## Employer Partner Guide to Work-based Learning

The Work-Based Learning (WBL) program affords young people from West Central Texas the opportunity to hone their skills and gain valuable work experience, while simultaneously completing high school graduation requirements and potentially gaining college credit.

Work-based learning is as old as education itself. While the policy environment and public consensus about the value of such programs has waxed and waned over the years, work-based learning has emerged as a priority in recent decades. Built from the premise that people learn best when they apply learning to real-life situations, work-based learning ensures participants gain academic and practical experiences to enable them to get jobs and fill critical roles.

### Why Consider Work-Based Learning?

Employers who partner to provide work-based learning opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships reap rewards, especially in tight labor markets. In addition to reporting increased innovation and improved workplace diversity (which in itself results in higher profit margins), more than 80 percent of employers that supported apprenticeships reported increased productivity and output.

Employers who provide work-based learning opportunities such as job shadowing, internships, cooperative education, or apprenticeships benefit in several ways:

**Talent pipeline development:** WBL helps employers identify, train, and retain workers who already understand their industry and organizational culture.

**Increased productivity:** Employers frequently report improvements in efficiency, innovation, and problem-solving.

**Diversity and inclusion:** By opening doors to new populations of learners and job seekers, WBL fosters more diverse teams, which can drive better business outcomes.

**Community impact:** Offering WBL opportunities is a tangible way to invest in the workforce and strengthen the local economy.

### Getting Started

The first step for an employer is to define the type of work-based learning experience they want to offer. Consider the following:

“Our incumbent staff finds joy in teaching, mentoring, and leading young people to experience our learning environment. High precision manufacturing is both challenging and rewarding – with ample opportunity to learn and innovate – our team is rewarded personally and as a team as we experience these successes together. The young persons that join us bring new perspective and energy bringing added potential for continual improvement.”

- **Richard Williams, CEO, RAM Inc.**

**Available jobs:** Does your business need part-time or short-term support in roles that align with in-demand skills?

**Supervision capacity:** Do you have staff available to mentor and train a participant?

**Resources:** Can your business provide payroll, tools, or insurance coverage for participants?

**Workplace readiness:** Is your organization prepared to provide a safe, inclusive, and educational environment for learners or job seekers?

Once these elements are in place, employers can work with education providers, workforce organizations, or training partners to identify candidates.

### Process Guide

While programs may vary, most effective WBL experiences follow a similar process:

1. **Industry Tour or Job Shadowing:** Gives participants a chance to observe a workplace, explore roles, and determine interest before committing to longer-term placements.
2. **Work Readiness Training:** Prepares participants with essential skills, such as communication, professionalism, safety awareness, and knowledge of workplace rights and expectations.
3. **Interviews and Selection:** Employers conduct interviews as they would for other employees, selecting candidates who best meet the needs of the position and workplace.
4. **Internship or Apprenticeship Placement:** Participants are placed in paid, structured experiences that align with both employer needs and participant career goals.
5. **Training Plan:** A plan outlines the skills and competencies participants are expected to gain during the experience, providing a roadmap for both the learner and the employer.
6. **Supervision and Mentorship:** Employers identify staff to support participants, ensuring they are learning, safe, and engaged.
7. **Ongoing Communication:** Employers, training providers, and participants should remain in regular contact to address challenges, track progress, and adjust plans if needed.

8. **Evaluation and Recognition:** At the conclusion of the experience, employers evaluate performance, celebrate achievements, and consider whether participants might be strong candidates for permanent roles.

## Employer Responsibilities

Employers hosting WBL participants should:

- Provide a safe and inclusive workplace that meets all legal requirements.
- Offer meaningful, hands-on tasks that build skills and confidence.
- Ensure supervisors understand how to support and mentor learners.
- Communicate expectations clearly, including work hours, pay, required materials, and workplace conduct.
- Pay a fair and competitive wage whenever possible.
- Offer feedback and complete evaluations to document participant progress.

## Safety and Professional Standards

**Workplace safety:** Employers are responsible for ensuring participants are trained in safe work practices and provided with the necessary protective equipment.

**Harassment-free environment:** Employers must uphold a zero-tolerance policy toward harassment and communicate complaint procedures clearly.

**Tools and uniforms:** Employers should avoid passing costs to participants if it would reduce pay below minimum wage, and where possible, provide required tools or uniforms.

## Addressing Challenges

Not every placement will be a perfect fit. If issues arise:

- Employers should communicate concerns directly with the participant and, if applicable, the training, education, or intermediary partner.
- If termination is necessary, employers should follow standard HR practices and provide clear reasoning.
- Participants may also choose to resign; employers should document and communicate this appropriately.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What kinds of jobs are eligible for work-based learning experiences?**

Workforce Solutions is prioritizing roles that are in [high demand in the region](#), as well as those with growing demand such as IT and telecommunications jobs.

### **How can high school students participate?**

While there are [certain roles](#) that 16-17 year old workers cannot fulfill, the vast majority of occupations are eligible. Businesses hosting internship experiences must carry insurance to protect students, workers, employees, and visitors.

Typically, a student will be able to work 50-150 hours over 10-15 weeks, depending on the employer's needs and the student's academic and extracurricular obligations. During summer months, students may be able to work full-time.

### **What are my responsibilities after the participant begins working?**

High-quality work-based learning allows participants to real-world experience while not restricting participation to those who can afford to work without compensation. Texas minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. While employers can set their own rates, employer partners are encouraged to pay a competitive wage. The Texas Workforce Commission notes that employers report paying between \$12-\$15 per hour for internships, and more in some in-demand fields.

For roles that require tools and equipment or uniforms, employers [may not deduct expenses](#) for these materials to the extent that it would reduce the employee's pay below minimum wage. Where appropriate, employers should consider providing necessary work tools and equipment directly. Where this is not possible, either because employers cannot accommodate additional expenses or because workers cannot absorb additional costs, the employer should connect with Workforce Solutions. The Workforce Solutions team may be able to identify other funding sources to cover tools, materials, and uniforms for workers.

With youth workers, the priority must be Safety First, and it is everyone's responsibility.

- The employer is responsible for creating a safe environment for all employees. In addition, the employer should train participants to recognize hazards and unsafe situations. The supervising manager is responsible for the participant's safety, and for providing that instruction as needed.

"An unfortunate fact is that there are large portions of the US that are either growing or dying. And there seems to be little in between. There are large portions of West Texas that are suffering that same fate. The best way to keep this from happening to our portion of West Texas is to offer the young people in the area a reason to stay. Anything we as employers and the community at large can do to aide in this will only benefit us all."

**-Brian Howell, Regional Human Resource Manager, Buzzi Unicem USA**

- Participants, too, are responsible for their own safety. They should be exhorted to take safety training seriously and to recognize unsafe conditions and situations.

Beyond physical safety, all employees are entitled to a harassment free workplace. The pre-experience orientation will encourage supervisors to directly communicate the company's anti-harassment policy and describe behaviors that qualify under the policy in detail. Employers should walk young workers through the complaint process step-by-step and identify multiple people to whom a complaint may be made if the complaint is about the work-based learning participant's supervisor.

Employers may also be asked to formally assess the worker's performance for the purposes of awarding high school and/or college credit.

***What if things aren't working out?***

In all employment relationships, there is the possibility that the employer or the employee wishes to end the arrangement. The decision to terminate the participant's employment is entirely at the discretion of the employer for cause or convenience. The work-based learning participant may also voluntarily resign. Partners should recognize that terminating the relationship may affect academic performance for any students participating in work-based learning.

In the event the termination is for cause, it is understood that:

- The employee has received clear guidance and has understanding (by way of the employee handbook and onboarding activities) of the requirements of the position, including standards of conduct and progressive discipline policies of the employer.
- The employer will inform the participant prior to termination of the reason for termination and provide a copy to the education and intermediary partners, if applicable.
- All customary and normal employer efforts to maintain the employment of the worker will be made in the same manner the employer affords any other employee.

If the employee is terminated for convenience, it is understood that:

- The employer will communicate with the any training, or intermediary partners at the earliest opportunity prior to termination to enable alternative arrangements.

If the employee voluntarily resigns, it is understood that:

"The impact of young workers on the morale at Rentech Boiler Systems seems to be felt most on the individual level. If you pull the more seasoned workers to the side and ask them, they will tell you that they find it rewarding to mentor and pass on that work knowledge and wisdom to the 'greenhands'. It must be innate to our human nature to want to convey what we know to the next generation!"

***-Jed Partin, Rentech Boiler Systems, Inc.***

- The employer will communicate with any training, education, or intermediary partners when notified by the employee of their intent to resign, or within three working days after the worker fails to report to work.

***What if I want to hire the work-based learning participant permanently?***

In positive situations, employers may wish to end their agreement to bring a participant on as a full-time hire. While attention should be paid to ensuring student participants can continue with their education and complete the credential aligned with the work-based learning experience, WBL-to-hire is a sign of a strong program. The employer should notify any training, education, or intermediary partners of their plans to make an offer and follow their standard hiring procedures.

***How does a work-based learning experience conclude?***

Successful completion is cause for celebration and recognition. As a host employer, you may be asked to complete a formal experience evaluation survey. The survey will assess satisfaction, learning outcomes, job performance, areas for improvement, best practices, and other factors designed to enable a full understanding of the experience. For participants from education, training, or intermediary partners such as Workforce Solutions, success stories may be shared publicly.

***How do I plug in to existing work-based learning opportunities delivered by Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas?***

For more information, please contact [wbl@wfswct.org](mailto:wbl@wfswct.org). We look forward to connecting with you to bring great work-based learning experiences to the region's talented future workforce!