

Plastic Recycling, Inc.



[Plastic Recycling, Inc.](#) is based in Indianapolis. With about 200 employees spread across several states, the company turns postindustrial and postconsumer plastics into products for industries such as automotive, packaging, and consumer goods.

The company operates multiple levels of work-based learning, from high school apprenticeships to college internships and co-ops, each tailored to develop skills relevant to its production and engineering processes. “We’ve had apprenticeship programs for several years,” Chad Smith, chief personnel officer at Plastic Recycling, Inc., commented, “and our high school program is now in its fourth year. We also run summer internships and college co-ops.”

High school apprentices work part time during the school year and full time in the summer, gaining exposure to manufacturing, quality control, engineering, and operations. “They’re usually 16 or 17 when they start,” Smith said. “They work about 10 to 20 hours a week during the school year, and then they’re here full time in the summer.” Apprentices earn wages, gain credentials, and often continue with the company after graduation.

At the college level, interns work over the summer and are deeply integrated with production, engineering, and research projects, contributing to current workload and working on specialized projects. College interns work directly with department heads and project managers, and earn wages for their work.

The company’s work-based learning programs aim to solve real business problems while investing in people.

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“Our goal is innovation, product, and process,” commented Smith. “We have ideas on projects, but they’re learning things in college that we often don’t know about. They’re getting fresh perspectives on cutting-edge theories and techniques.”

Smith also credits the internship program for strengthening partnerships with local colleges and building Plastic Recycling, Inc.’s brand. “Partnerships, whether with academia or other community organizations, are a high priority. We’re very public and open to working with the community. Partnership opens doors we sometimes forget about. It’s also helped from a branding perspective. Now when we go to our big flagship campus, people know who we are.”

Plastic Recycling, Inc., is also looking ahead, anticipating increasing technological shifts in the industry and accompanying shifts in the talent needed. “These new machines run on apps. Who better to help us start training and learning than the youth coming in through our internships and apprenticeships? Often times, they are more prepared and adapted to running a machine with an app than our employees who have been here for 25 years.”

Enabling Conditions

Conditions within the company that supported effectiveness and sustainability include:

1. Early education and leadership buy-in

“Education upfront across the leadership team, including owners, is key,” Smith said, describing how important it is to set expectations before launching a new work-based learning program. He added that having “positive role models” among supervisors and mentors made a difference.

2. A clear ‘win-win’ philosophy

Plastic Recycling, Inc., frames the program as a clear example of doing well while doing good. “The goal is a win-win,” Smith said. “A win for the apprentices and interns, and if they stay, it’s a win for the company because we completed a project and saved money. There are so many ways you can win if you do it right.”

Core Program Activities

When Plastic Recycling created its work-based learning program, the major considerations that lead to the program’s effectiveness included:

1. Department-level engagement and readiness

Building awareness and ownership of the program among staff is important, as well. Smith credits visibility and buy-in among managers and staff as a lynchpin for the program. “Talk about it with each department. Figure out a way to carve out work for interns,” Smith said. “There has to be willingness around teaching, as long as interns are willing to learn.”

2. The right learner mindset

Smith acknowledges that for an internship program to work, interns themselves have to approach the program with a learning mindset. “The ones who come in and act like they know everything don’t work out so well, because

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3. Public investments in talent

Plastic Recycling, Inc., leverages a public program in Indiana that supports businesses in providing high-quality work-based learning experiences. “We have worked with [EARN Indiana](#). When I can go back to our ownership team and say we have saved \$38,000 on internships because of this program, that is a win,” Smith commented.

the veterans here will not share any info with someone like that,” Smith explained. “We had one student who was like a kid in a candy store, learning everything we could give him. After a period of time, he became disengaged because he wasn’t learning anymore. I thought we may lose him, but we shifted him into a new role with plenty of learning opportunities, and he has been engaged ever since.”

3. Deliberate human resources support and practical design

In Plastic Recycling, Inc.’s model, interns do real work, and can lighten the load for existing staff, while gaining valuable skills, especially when teams are short-staffed and worn down. Interns and apprentices are able to perform basic preventative maintenance, providing that team with more capacity. “Certainly, on the maintenance side, HR has been pretty deliberate about taking things off the plates of veterans,” Smith said. “That’s another way to get them on board.”

Understanding Business Value

For a small manufacturer, the perceived return on investment has been substantial, both financially and culturally. Despite lacking a systemic measuring system, as Smith put it, "It's not even close. The ROI is definitely positive."

1. Innovation and Adaptability

Apprentices and interns contribute directly to productivity. "They're not just observers. They're doing work that makes a difference," Smith said. Student projects have generated measurable efficiencies. Smith described an intern working on a method to match customers' color needs efficiently. Another built an automated system that generates reports for salespeople describing product specifications. "In the past, we had to find that data and build a presentation. She just built a spreadsheet that automatically generates the data requested. She has graduated, but we're still using the program, and it's saving us time. And our materials scientist can focus on his work of research and development instead of building a report," Smith shared.

Focusing efforts to build the talent pipeline toward emerging talent has brought new ideas and perspectives to the company. "This is a chance to shape and mold, which is another reason why I love the internship model. Most of our interns live in a school environment every day, and they're used to learning. They're not coming in with bad habits. They're shapable. The more questions they ask here the better," commented Smith.

2. Leadership Development

The mentoring structure built into the company's programs has had lasting cultural effects. "This has been a huge win. The interns and apprentices are getting paired with a mentor, who is an aspiring leader. We're now able to give young leaders the opportunity to lead. It's a really great opportunity."

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Smith shared, "We had a high school apprentice in HR who had no idea what HR was when she started," he said. "By the end of the program, she was helping onboard new employees and leading orientation for Spanish-speaking staff. She figured out what HR is, and now she's teaching others."

Lessons Learned

Plastic Recycling, Inc.'s experience illustrates how small and medium-sized employers can use work-based learning to address workforce challenges, cultivate internal leadership, and strengthen community ties, all while adapting a veteran workforce toward new technology.

- Maintain a “win-win” philosophy**
 Sustaining enthusiasm depends on keeping the focus on the benefits for students, employees, and the business simultaneously.
- Keep scale manageable and relationships personal**
 Starting small and maintaining close relationships allowed for individual support, enabling everyone to advance with trust.
- Engage departments directly in design**
 Discussing work-based learning opportunities with each department helped identify real tasks and meaningful projects that fit business priorities.
- Support mentors and veteran employees**
 Adjusting workloads and “taking things off the plates of veterans” helped experienced staff invest time in teaching and mentoring without added strain.

Smith commented, “Some of our early skeptical veterans have become some of the biggest advocates for the program. That has been one of the most rewarding things, seeing the doubters who didn’t want any part of it become champions and recognize that this generation is coming up and will do this work after they’re gone. I can tell our team has gotten a lot of enjoyment from teaching young people.”

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