

# Zooming in on Zentech

By Cory Blaylock,  
Director, IPC Workforce Partnerships

## Zentech among first to adopt IPC Apprenticeship National Program Standards

IPC achieved a landmark in 2023 by creating an apprenticeship program approved by the U.S. Department of Labor. With such a registered framework in place, industry can work through IPC to secure local, state, and federal dollars for workforce development in a way they've never been able to do before.

The response from industry has been enthusiastic. Zentech Manufacturing, headquartered in

Baltimore, Maryland, with production facilities in Bloomington, Illinois, and Richardson, Texas, is among the first employer partners to adopt IPC's national program. IPC is working with Zentech to secure grant funding that will help offset the costs incurred with training. Stephanie Austin, marketing director, helps explain Zentech's excitement for jumping on board so quickly.



“ It was important that we alter our approach to attract a new generation of workers. — Stephanie Austin ”

## **What motivated Zentech to become an early adopter?**

*Stephanie Austin:* We recognize what has been talked about for years: Our workforce is aging, and many Millennials and Gen-Zers don't know the benefits of a career in manufacturing. We also know that these generations approach the market differently than their predecessors, so it was important that we alter our approach to attract a new generation of workers.

Raising awareness about careers in manufacturing has been a focus of our blog, "Manufacturing Careers on the Factory Floor," where Zentech employees tell their success stories and why they love their jobs in manufacturing. We also recently published an article on our blog and IPC's blog titled, "Manufacturing a Creative Workforce Development Strategy." It discusses our ideas for a different approach to finding talent.

Zentech is a leader in many areas. The apprenticeship program seemed like the next logical step for us in demonstrating what we believe: to be ambassadors of our company and the industry and lead by example.

## **How has IPC supported Zentech in ensuring the success of the apprenticeship standards?**

IPC's support is likely the main reason it was so easy to move forward. The groundwork IPC laid in attaining a registered apprenticeship program through the U.S. Department of Labor and having someone on staff to help with the grant applications was a game changer for us. IPC has walked with us through every step of implementation. Without their help, this would have been a daunting task for any small business to achieve.

## **Were there any challenges in implementing the apprenticeship standards? If so, how is Zentech addressing them?**

IPC considered the interests of all their members when they were drafting these standards, so everything was in line with Zentech's goals. I'm sure a lot of other companies would feel the same.



Stephanie Austin

## **How has the Zentech workforce responded to the introduction of the apprenticeship standards?**

I have been conducting focus groups with our production management team for several months to determine the best approach for attracting new talent. As it turns out, many are passionate about attracting the future workforce, and their insights were invaluable to my research. Naturally, when I told others we were starting an apprenticeship program, they were ecstatic. The structure of the apprenticeship program with IPC training courses is a huge plus for them. Tracking their progress in Work Hands also helps everyone be on the same page.

Our apprentices expressed their appreciation that Zentech sees their potential for growth and is investing in their future. One of our mentors is retiring after 50 years in the industry and looks forward to imparting her knowledge to the next generation. It's a win-win for everyone.

## **How has Zentech integrated IPC standards with any existing training or development programs?**

To be honest, this apprenticeship opportunity came at a perfect time. We are developing an employee engagement initiative with a more structured employee development and training program. The IPC apprenticeship program aligns with our goals and objectives.





### **What is the synergy between the apprenticeship standards and other workforce development initiatives?**

We recently published an article on the IPC blog discussing creative ways to grow your workforce and engage with a new generation of workers using marketing principles. Some may ask what marketing has to do with workforce development. Everything! We operate in a competitive landscape; selling ourselves and our industry is key. Apprenticeship is a perfect selling point because it benefits everyone.

### **What advice does Zentech offer to other companies that might adopt IPC's electronics assembler apprenticeship standards?**

It's not as scary as it looks. Since IPC has laid the groundwork and helps with implementation, all that's left is your enthusiasm to make it work. You need to hire people anyway. Since each state has financial incentive programs for hiring registered apprentices, why not recoup some of your costs and increase your chances of retaining long-term employees? It's a win-win situation.

### **Are there any lessons or best practices learned that you'd like to share?**

- You don't have to know everything when you start. I found the key is just to start. I call it "nuggetizing." Break it down into smaller, more manageable, less overwhelming tasks. You'll gain confidence and knowledge as you go along.
- Start with your current employees first. This is an easy way to get your feet wet. They're already hired, and you need to train them anyway.
- Make the most of your IPC membership. There are many great resources, both in knowledgeable staff and helpful information, to get your apprenticeship program off the ground. IPC has a staff member who assists in applying for grants, so you don't have to navigate it alone. IPC has described it as a "plug-and-play" experience, which I can agree with. 🌈



Read "Real Progress Toward Solving U.S. Workforce Problems," an interview with Cory Blaylock by the I-Connect007 Editorial Team, in the February 2024 issue of *PCB007 Magazine*. In this interview, Cory defines and explains an apprenticeship model, how IPC achieved accreditation with the U.S. Department of Labor, and the incentive for companies to participate.