

## A PATHWAY TO ADVANCEMENT: MONTANA APPRENTICESHIP IMPROVES RETENTION AT CHEMICAL COMPANY

**ABOUT AMERICAN CHEMET.** American Chemet Corporation (ACC), started in 1946, manufactures and markets metal oxides, powders and chemicals. While founded in Illinois, ACC moved to East Helena, Montana, a year later to be closer to the state's raw material resources, and the company has been a leading manufacturer in central Montana ever since. In the 1970s, ACC began producing copper oxides, paving the way to a major expansion into global markets. The company produces chemicals for a wide variety of industries including agriculture, lumber, automotive, and roofing.

**THE CHALLENGE.** Over the last few years, ACC - like many manufacturers - found it increasingly challenging to hire and retain new employees, particularly for entry-level positions. ACC was very interested in workforce programs that could help increase the retention of their employees, especially those who have been with the company for less than 3 years.

**MEP CENTER'S ROLE.** In 2024, ACC partnered with the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center (MMEC), part of the MEP National Network™, to pilot the state's new Certified Manufacturing Associate Apprenticeship. The program begins with on-line classes covering topics such as safety, additive manufacturing, blueprint reading, CNC, inspection, lean manufacturing, math fundamentals, measurement and inspection, quality, and robotics - all topics that are relevant to entry-level positions in various industries. Once employees complete the twenty-five online classes, they receive a nationally recognized Certified Manufacturing Associate (CMfgA) credential through the Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME). Companies offer the coursework along with on-the-job (OJT) training (typically 1 year). Once the OJT session is completed, the employee earns the title of "Certified Manufacturing Apprentice" and receives an apprentice certificate from the State of Montana. Twelve employees at ACC signed up for the first apprenticeship cohort.

MMEC Business Advisor Brian Sullivan helped ACC administer the program, taught in-person courses on site to supplement the online training, and conducted review sessions prior to the exam. The in-person courses provided opportunities to address individual needs and encourage students to continue their progress. Many of the participants completed all the courses and the final exam within four months, and the company promoted one of the apprentices immediately. All that have completed 2,000 hours of work after passing the final exam have received their apprentice certificate from the State of Montana. Based on these results, the company immediately opened a second apprenticeship opportunity and is currently planning a third.

**"Since we implemented the apprenticeship program, turnover has gone down significantly, especially with new employees in their first six to 12 months. This year, our turnover for employees within the first six months has decreased by 35 percent, and retention of those who have completed the program is 90 percent."**

-Jill Bollier, Human Resources Director

## RESULTS



16 jobs created or retained



\$64,000 in cost savings

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