

# **STEP AHEAD**

## **2026 AWARDS**

# **Nominations Guide**

**Nominate**

**Nomination Period**  
Tuesday, September 2–  
Friday, October 10, 2025



STEP Ahead is a national program led by the Manufacturing Institute to support and recognize women and allies in manufacturing who are driving impact from the shop floor to the C-suite. These leaders serve as living proof of what's possible in a manufacturing career. By celebrating their stories, STEP Ahead helps reshape perceptions of the industry, showcase the wide array of talent that powers it and build a stronger future for manufacturing.

### The program features three interconnected components

#### AWARDS AND LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Honoring more than 130 exceptional leaders each year for their contributions to manufacturing and their communities. These awardees inspire the next generation and showcase the breadth of talent powering the industry. Ahead of the awards gala, awardees take part in a two-day leadership conference with tailored workshops and peer networking.

#### MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Connecting women and allies in manufacturing with mentors and mentees to foster growth, confidence and career advancement.

#### ALUMNI COMMUNITY

A nationwide network of past awardees who remain engaged, share expertise, learn from one another and gain ongoing leadership development while paying it forward to the next generation of manufacturing leaders.

Together, these elements create a powerful program that recognizes excellence and equips participants to inspire others, strengthen workplace cultures and advance the manufacturing workforce of the future.



## Why STEP Ahead Exists

Manufacturers are facing a persistent talent shortage and skills gap. STEP Ahead helps address this by shining a spotlight on the women and allies who are building strong teams and setting high standards of excellence across the industry. By celebrating role models and inspiring participants to pay it forward, STEP Ahead helps manufacturers:

- Strengthen retention of key talent
- Show future workers what success in manufacturing looks like
- Build a network of women and allies who shape strong, collaborative work environments
- Reinforce the value of peer support, mentorship and leadership at every level

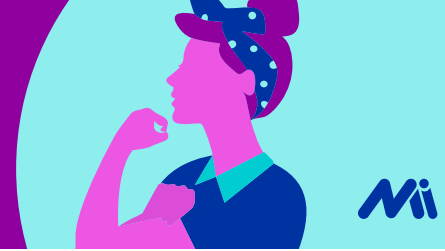
## About the STEP Ahead Awards

The STEP Ahead Awards honor exceptional individuals in manufacturing who lead by example and strengthen their workplaces. Each year, nearly a thousand nominations are submitted from across the country. From this highly competitive pool, just 100 Honorees, 30 Emerging Leaders and up to 15 Champions are recognized as standout leaders making a lasting impact.

Award recipients are invited to participate in a two-day leadership program before being celebrated at an evening gala alongside peers, family and colleagues. They also join a powerful network of more than 1,700 STEP Ahead alumni—leaders who are committed to paying it forward and inspiring the next generation.

## Key Dates

- **Nominations Open:** September 2, 2025
- **Nominations Close:** October 10, 2025
- **Nominators Notified:** Early December 2025
- **Awardees Notified:** Early January 2026
- **Award Acceptance Deadline:** January 30, 2026
- **Public Announcement:** March 9, 2026
- **Leadership Conference:** April 22–23, 2026
- **Awards Gala:** April 23, 2026



## Award Categories

There are three award categories nominators may consider:

### HONOREE

Established professionals who have made significant, sustained impact in their organization and across their community. *(100 individuals will be recognized as Honorees).*

### EMERGING LEADER

Rising professionals who are already making an impact in manufacturing. Whether early in their careers or newly transitioned into the industry, nominees typically have fewer than ten years of experience within the manufacturing industry. They stand out for their leadership, fresh perspective and strong potential to shape the future of the industry. *(30 individuals will be recognized as Emerging Leaders).*

### CHAMPION

Individuals who demonstrate allyship in action. Champions actively support others by fostering supportive cultures, opening doors for others and modeling leadership that ensures all talent can thrive. Champions are known for their commitment to mentorship, advocacy and building strong teams across the organization. *(Up to 15 individuals will be recognized as Champions).*

## Nominee Eligibility

Nominees must meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Currently employed in the manufacturing industry
- Work for a company with a U.S.-based manufacturing presence
- Nominated by a colleague, supervisor or industry peer (self-nominations and nominations submitted by public relations firms are not accepted)
- Companies may submit up to 12 nominations total - up to 10 nominations across the Emerging Leader and Honoree categories and up to 2 nominations for the Champion category; an internal vetting process is encouraged

We recommend companies coordinate internally to ensure nominations are vetted and prioritized before submission.



## Nominee Criteria

### HONOREE AND EMERGING LEADER\*

Nominees in both categories will be evaluated using the following criteria:

- **Industry Impact:** Contributions that have driven innovation, performance, operational excellence or organizational success.
- **Leadership and Influence:** A visible leader or emerging changemaker who fosters collaboration and drives meaningful progress.
- **Mentorship and Talent Development:** Actively supports the growth of others through mentoring, coaching or talent advocacy.
- **Culture Driver:** Models behavior that strengthens organizational culture.
- **Community Engagement:** Civic involvement and outreach beyond the workplace that enhances the broader community.

*\*Note for Emerging Leader Nominees: Nominees typically have fewer than 10 years of experience in the manufacturing industry and may be at any age, whether starting their careers or joining the sector through a career transition.*

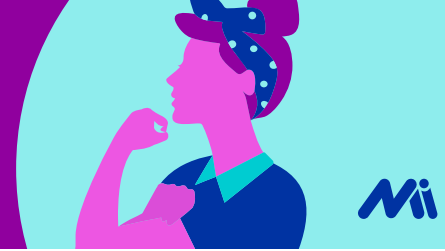
## Champion Criteria

Nominees will be evaluated on the following:

- **Visible Allyship:** A proactive commitment supporting others working in manufacturing. This can include mentoring and sponsoring growth opportunities.
- **Track Record of Impact:** Proven history of fostering supportive workplace culture and driving meaningful change within their organization or the broader industry.
- **Support for Advancement:** Leads or shapes programs, policies or practices that enable others to thrive.
- **Community Engagement:** Civic involvement and outreach beyond the workplace that enhances the broader community.

## Section 1

# The Nomination Process



## The Nomination Process

*Submitting a nomination for the STEP Ahead Awards involves three key steps. Please read the instructions carefully before beginning your application.*

### STEP 1: CREATE A NOMINATOR ACCOUNT

All nominators must create an account to access and submit the nomination form.

Visit the [STEP Ahead Nominations portal](#) and follow the prompts to enter your information and create your nominator account.

Note: Each company may submit up to 12 total nominations: up to 10 across the Honoree and Emerging Leader categories combined, and up to 2 in the Champion category. We recommend having a single point of contact to coordinate and manage nominations.

If you're unsure whether your company already has a main point of contact, please email the STEP Ahead team at [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org).

For guidance on coordinating nominations within your company, please refer to the best practices section on pages 23–29.

### STEP 2: START A NEW NOMINATION

Once your account is set up:

1. Navigate to **Programs** and select **More** under **STEP Ahead Awards** as the program you're submitting a nomination to. You can also visit the [STEP Ahead Nominations portal](#) to access the nomination form once you have set up your account.

## STEP Ahead Awards

MORE >



2. Review the overview page to familiarize yourself with the award information.
3. Click the green **Apply** button in the upper-right corner to begin your nomination.
4. Name your nomination using the suggested framework of **Company Name\_Nominee Name** as this will help you track which nominees you have submitted for.
5. Click into your first task, STEP Ahead Awards Nomination Form.

A screenshot of the STEP Ahead Awards nomination form interface. On the left, a sidebar shows '0 of 1 tasks complete' with a progress bar and 'Last edited: Aug 11 2025 03:29 PM (EDT)'. It has 'REVIEW' and 'SUBMIT' buttons. The main area shows the nomination title 'Manufacturing Institute\_Lexi Champion' and ID '0000000018'. Below this are tabs for 'APPLICATION' (selected) and 'ACTIVITY'. A 'Your tasks' section at the bottom contains a task 'STEP Ahead Awards Nomination Form' with a document icon and a right arrow.

Select the award category for your nominee:

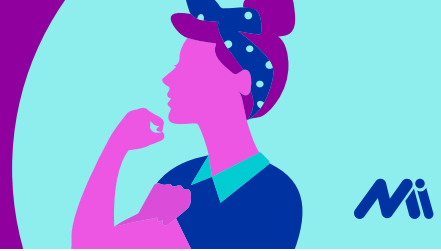
- **Honoree:** Established professionals who have made significant, sustained impact in their organization and in their community.
- **Emerging Leader:** Rising professionals who are already making an impact in manufacturing. Whether early in their careers or newly transitioned to the industry, nominees typically have less than 10 years of experience in the manufacturing sector. They stand out for their leadership, fresh perspective and strong potential to shape the future of the industry.
- **Champion:** Individuals who demonstrate allyship in action. These individuals actively support others by fostering supportive cultures, opening doors for others and modeling leadership that ensures all talent can thrive. Champions are known for their commitment to mentorship, advocacy and building strong teams across their organizations.

Once you've selected the award category, click **Next** to proceed.

You'll now access the nomination form, which will ask for the following details:

- Information about the nominee
- Human resources point of contact
- Corporate communications contact
- Company representative





After completing this section, click **Mark as Complete** to move on to the second part of the nomination, the **essay questions**.

Back to application

STEP Ahead Awards

Manufacturing Institute\_Lexi Champion

ID: 0000000016

STEP Ahead Awards

Essay Questions - Honoree

1 of 2 tasks complete

Essay Questions - Honoree

0%

**\*ESSAY**

The STEP Ahead Awards honor exceptional individuals who are making a difference in the manufacturing industry and their communities.

The following essay questions are designed to help the judges understand your nominee's impact, leadership and contributions. Strong responses will include specific examples, measurable outcomes where possible and a clear connection to the award criteria. Each essay entry can be up to 250 words in length and the cumulative scores of these essays will be used to determine the 2026 STEP Ahead awardees.

Each nomination includes four essay questions, with a 250-word maximum per question. These responses are the most important part of the evaluation, so we encourage thoughtfulness and specificity.

### STEP 3: SUBMIT AND REPEAT

Once all sections of the nomination are complete and reviewed, click **SUBMIT**.

Please note, once the nomination is submitted, you will not be able to make any changes.

Back to application

STEP Ahead Awards

Manufacturing Institute\_Lexi Champion

ID: 0000000016

STEP Ahead Awards

Essay Questions - Honoree

2 of 2 tasks complete

Last edited: Aug 11 2025 03:25 PM (EDT)

REVIEW

SUBMIT

Essay Questions - Honoree

Completed Aug 11 2025 03:25 PM (EDT)

**Essay Questions - Honoree**

**\*ESSAY**

The STEP Ahead Awards honor exceptional individuals who are making a difference in the manufacturing industry and their communities.

The following essay questions are designed to help the judges understand your nominee's impact, leadership and contributions. Strong responses will include specific examples, measurable outcomes where possible and a clear connection to the award criteria. Each essay entry can be up to 250 words in length and the cumulative scores of these essays will be used to determine the 2026 STEP Ahead awardees.

This is your opportunity to tell the nominee's story - what sets them apart and why their work matters to your company, the nominee's community and the manufacturing industry.

**\*Essay Question 1:** Describe a significant accomplishment or contribution the nominee has made within their organization.

What did they do, how did they do it any why was it impactful? This can include technical achievements, business results, innovation or operational excellence.



You'll receive a confirmation email once your nomination has been successfully submitted.

To submit another nomination, click **View more Programs** and repeat the process.

## Review and Selection

All submissions will be reviewed and scored by former STEP Ahead Award recipients, bringing firsthand insight into the qualities and achievements that define exceptional leaders in manufacturing.

Nominations will be evaluated against the award criteria, with judges assessing the nominee's demonstrated impact, leadership, mentorship, contributions to workplace culture and engagement within their community.

The review process is designed to ensure fairness and consistency. Each nomination is independently and blindly scored by multiple judges, and final selections are made based on cumulative scores. Each company may have one awardee per category - one Honoree, one Emerging Leader and one Champion.

Only complete nominations submitted by the stated deadline will be considered.

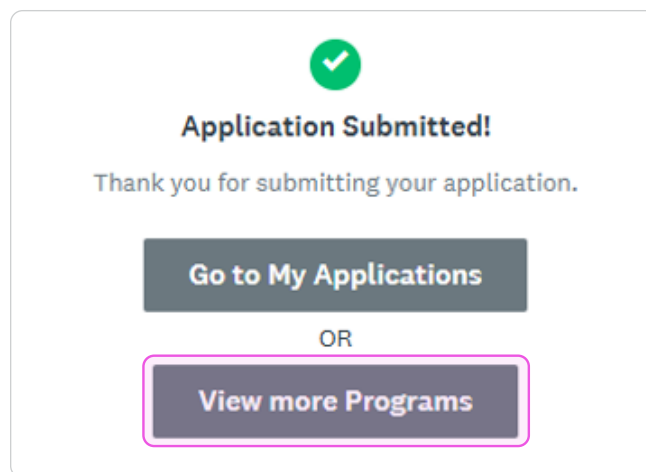
## Award Notification and Participation

**In early December 2025**, companies will be notified of the status of each of their nominees, with updates sent directly to the nominator, the HR point of contact and the communications point of contact.

Award recipients will be notified in **early January 2026**. Along with their notification, awardees will receive detailed information about the two-day STEP Ahead Leadership Conference and Awards, taking place April 22–23, 2026, in Washington, D.C.

Participation in both the Leadership Program and Awards is highly encouraged, as these events are integral to the STEP Ahead experience and provide valuable opportunities for recognition, professional development and networking.

The 2026 STEP Ahead awardees will be publicly announced by the Manufacturing Institute on **March 9, 2026**.



Section 2

# Nomination Form & Essay Questions

# 2026 STEP Ahead Awards Nomination Form

## Nominee Information

FIRST NAME

LAST NAME

WORK EMAIL

PHONE NUMBER

JOB TITLE

COMPANY

COMPANY ADDRESS

CITY/STATE/ZIP/COUNTRY

RELATIONSHIP TO NOMINEE

PHONETIC PRONUNCIATION OF NAME

COMPANY NAME (AS IT SHOULD  
APPEAR IN MATERIALS)

NOMINEE IS:

a) Currently in  
production

b) Not currently in  
production, but has  
been in production

c) Not in a production  
role, and has never  
been in production

UPLOAD COMPANY LOGO

PLEASE SPECIFY THE NOMINEE'S PRIMARY FIELD OR AREA OF WORK IN MANUFACTURING: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

IS THE NOMINEE CURRENTLY IN A PEOPLE LEADERSHIP ROLE?

☐ Yes, manages individuals or teams ☐ No, individual contributor ☐ Other, please specify:

---

---

---

---

# 2026 STEP Ahead Awards Nomination Form

HOW MANY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE DOES THE NOMINEE HAVE IN MANUFACTURING?

- a) Less that 5 years
- b) 5-10 years
- c) 11-20 years
- d) 20+ years

HAS THE NOMINEE EVER RECEIVED INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL RECOGNITION FOR THEIR WORK? ☐ Yes ☐ No

IF YES, PLEASE SPECIFY: \_\_\_\_\_

WHAT IS THE SIZE OF THE NOMINEE'S COMPANY?

- a) Fewer than 100 employees
- b) 100-499 employees
- c) 500-999 employees
- d) 1,000-4,999 employees
- e) 5000+ employees

HR Contact Information

NAME

TITLE

EMAIL

Communications Contact Information

NAME

TITLE

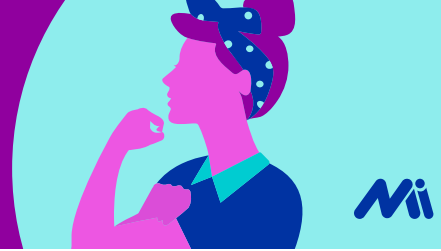
EMAIL

Company Representative For Nominee Information

NAME

TITLE

EMAIL



## 2026 Nomination Essay Questions – Honoree / Emerging Leader

**Describe a significant accomplishment or contribution the nominee has made within their organization.** What did they do, how did they do it and why was it impactful? This can include technical achievements, business results, innovation or operational excellence.

**How has the nominee demonstrated leadership by shaping a strong workplace culture and supporting the growth of others?** Please share a specific example of how they have built supportive teams, fostered collaboration or created an environment where others feel valued and empowered. Highlight any efforts to mentor, coach or advocate for colleagues or emerging talent.

**How does your nominee engage with the broader community?** This may include volunteering, civic engagement or youth outreach.

**Why should this individual be selected as an awardee?** Reflect on their overall impact – inside and outside of the organization – and how they embody the values of leadership, mentorship and manufacturing excellence.

## 2026 Nomination Essay Questions – Champion

**How does the nominee demonstrate visible allyship in their workplace?** Describe how the nominee actively supports and advocates for colleagues. Include examples such as sponsorship and efforts to challenge the status quo.

**What specific actions has the nominee taken to create a more positive and supportive culture?** Share examples of how the nominee fosters collaboration, builds strong teams and ensures others feel valued and supported.

**How does the nominee engage with their broader community?** Highlight the nominee's contributions to community initiatives.

**Why should this individual be recognized as a Champion award recipient?** Reflect on their overall influence inside and outside the organization and how they embody the values of allyship, mentorship and supportive leadership in manufacturing.



## Section 3

# Frequently Asked Questions



## Program Evolution

### WHY ARE WE CHANGING FROM WOMEN MAKE TO STEP AHEAD?

The Manufacturing Institute is returning to the STEP Ahead name for its annual awards program to better reflect the full scope and evolution of the program. What began as a recognition program has grown into a broader leadership platform—including awards, mentorship, alumni engagement and now, allyship. The STEP Ahead brand better captures the full breadth of the program.

STEP is an acronym representing science, technology, engineering and production.

Women MAKE helped raise visibility during a critical phase of growth. As we expand to include allies and deepen our focus on workplace culture, returning to STEP Ahead allows us to reflect the full community of leaders—while continuing to support women in the manufacturing sector.

### WILL WE STOP FOCUSING ON WOMEN IN THE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY?

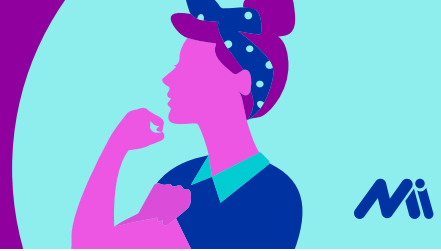
Women remain a focus of STEP Ahead and now we are bringing others into the work. By including allies and recognizing the broader ecosystem that contributes to the success of individuals in manufacturing, we're amplifying impact, not diluting it.

### OTHER THAN THE NAME OF THE AWARDS PROGRAM WHAT OTHER CHANGES ARE BEING MADE?

Along with the return to the STEP Ahead name, we're introducing several meaningful updates to strengthen and expand the program's impact:

- **Champion Category Expansion:** After a successful pilot, the Champion award is now a full award category. We will honor up to 15 individuals for their visible allyship and commitment to creating supportive workplace cultures. Nominees may be recognized for efforts like mentoring and sponsoring others, championing supportive policies or leading community initiatives that open doors for individuals from nontraditional backgrounds.
- **Evolving Emerging Leader Category:** We're updating the eligibility of the Emerging Leader category to reflect the various pathways into manufacturing. The Emerging Leader category will now be open to individuals with fewer than 10 years of manufacturing industry experience. This allows us to recognize both early-career professionals and those who have transitioned into manufacturing from other fields. This change helps create additional role models for future manufacturing talent to look up to.
- **Broader Audience for Leadership Conference:** The 2026 STEP Ahead Leadership Conference will expand its reach by welcoming Champion award recipients and opening a limited number of paid registration slots for additional allies across the manufacturing workforce. This broader audience creates new opportunities for cross-functional dialogue, shared learning and stronger peer connections among those driving culture change at every level of the industry.





## Nomination Process

### WHEN DO NOMINATIONS OPEN AND CLOSE?

Nominations open on Tuesday, September 2, 2025, and will close on Friday, October 10, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. ET. While in past years there have been extensions to allow additional time for nominations to be completed, with the expansion of our awards categories the deadline for nominations will not be extended to ensure adequate time for review by multiple peer judges.

### HOW DO I NOMINATE SOMEONE FOR THE 2026 STEP AHEAD AWARDS?

Nominations for the 2026 STEP Ahead Awards will officially open on Tuesday, September 2, 2025. This year, we're introducing a new nomination platform—SurveyMonkey Apply—to streamline the process and improve the user experience.

When nominations open, you will receive a link to the new portal along with step-by-step instructions for creating an account and submitting a nomination. Once you've created your free account, you'll be able to:

- Select the appropriate award category: Honoree, Emerging Leader or Champion
- Complete the nomination form
- Submit your nomination by the deadline: Friday, October 10, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. ET

If you plan to submit multiple nominations, you'll follow the same process for each individual nominee. Detailed guidance is available in this 2026 Nominations Guide and within the platform itself.

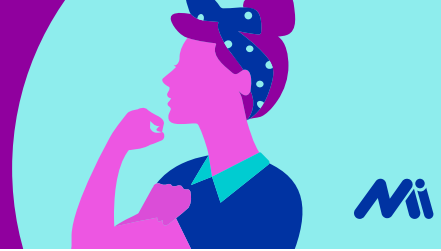
For questions or support, contact us at [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org).

### WHO CAN SUBMIT A NOMINATION?

A nominee must be nominated by a colleague, supervisor or peer. Self-nominations and nominations from PR firms are not accepted. Companies are encouraged to designate a single point of contact to coordinate nominations. Please contact the STEP Ahead team to check if your company already has a designated nominator before creating a new account.

### CAN I NOMINATE MYSELF?

No, self-nominations are not accepted. However, you may ask a colleague or supervisor to nominate you.



### **CAN I NOMINATE SOMEONE FROM OUTSIDE OF MY ORGANIZATION?**

Yes. However, if your nominee is selected, we will contact the nominee's employer to confirm their eligibility and participation before announcing their selection.

### **CAN A COMPANY NOMINATE SOMEONE OUTSIDE OF THE U.S.?**

A company may nominate an employee working internationally only if that company has U.S.-based operations. The nominee must contribute meaningfully to the U.S. manufacturing workforce or company culture.

### **HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO SUBMIT AN APPLICATION?**

There is no cost to submit a nomination. However, if your nominee is selected, their employer is expected to support their participation in the Leadership Conference and Awards Gala in Washington, D.C., on April 22–23, 2026.

### **IS THERE A LIMIT TO HOW MANY NOMINATIONS A COMPANY CAN SUBMIT?**

Yes. Each company may submit up to 12 nominations: up to 10 across the Honoree and Emerging Leader categories combined, and up to 2 in the Champion category. However, only one (1) Honoree, one (1) Emerging Leader and one (1) Champion per company can be selected.

### **HOW CAN LARGE COMPANIES MANAGE THE 10-NOMINATION LIMIT?**

This Nominations Guide includes best practices from manufacturers of all sizes, including sample internal vetting processes and tips for identifying standout candidates. We also recommend assigning a central nomination coordinator.

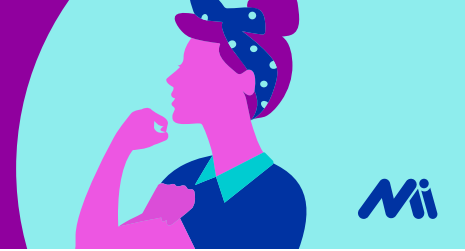
## **Eligibility**

### **WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO BE NOMINATED FOR A STEP AHEAD AWARD?**

Any individual working in the manufacturing industry may be eligible, depending on the award category. Eligibility criteria are outlined in the Nominee Eligibility section of the website and nomination portal.

### **ARE THE HONOREE, EMERGING LEADER AND CHAMPION AWARDS EXCLUSIVE TO WOMEN?**

STEP Ahead advocates for all individuals working in manufacturing. The eligibility criteria for all three categories—Honoree, Emerging Leader and Champion—are open to all genders. This reflects recent federal guidance and our commitment to recognizing the broad array of talent within manufacturing.



### CAN SOMEONE BE NOMINATED AGAIN IF THEY WERE PREVIOUSLY NOMINATED BUT NOT SELECTED?

Yes. Individuals who have been nominated in previous years but did not receive an award may be nominated again.

### CAN A PREVIOUS AWARD RECIPIENT BE NOMINATED AGAIN?

It depends. Individuals cannot receive the same award more than once.

For example, past Emerging Leaders cannot be nominated to be an Emerging Leader again but can be nominated for the Honoree or Champion categories.

### HOW DO I KNOW IF MY NOMINEE IS ELIGIBLE?

Full eligibility guidelines can be found in the nomination portal and Nominations Guide. If you're unsure, reach out to the STEP Ahead team at [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org).

### HOW MANY INDIVIDUALS WILL BE HONORED?

In 2026, we will recognize:

- 100 Honorees
- 30 Emerging Leaders
- Up to 15 Champions

## Award Categories

### WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN HONOREE, EMERGING LEADER AND CHAMPION?

- **Honorees** are experienced professionals making lasting impacts in their companies and communities.
- **Emerging Leaders** are high-performing, leaders who typically have fewer than 10 years of experience in the manufacturing sector. They can either be early in their careers or newly transitioned into the manufacturing industry.
- **Champions** are individuals recognized for their visible, proactive allyship and for fostering supportive workplaces in manufacturing.



## Application Strength & Selection

### WHAT DOES A COMPETITIVE APPLICATION LOOK LIKE?

Strong applications highlight specific achievements, leadership impact and measurable results. View sample essay responses for Honoree, Emerging Leader and Champion categories on pages 30–37 of this nomination guide.

### WHO REVIEWS THE NOMINATIONS?

Nominations undergo a blind review by a national committee of past award recipients, who evaluate based on alignment with award criteria and demonstrated impact.

### WHEN WILL AWARD RECIPIENTS BE ANNOUNCED?

In early December 2025 companies will be notified of the status of each of their nominees, with updates sent directly to the nominator, the HR point of contact and the communications point of contact. Selected Honorees, Emerging Leaders and Champions will be notified in early January 2026. A public announcement by the Manufacturing Institute will follow on March 9, 2026.

## Post-Selection & Event Participation

### WHAT HAPPENS IF MY NOMINEE IS SELECTED?

They will be invited to participate in the 2026 STEP Ahead Leadership Conference and Awards Gala in Washington, D.C. on April 23–23, 2026, and welcomed into the STEP Ahead community as a program alum.

### WHAT IS EXPECTED OF AWARD RECIPIENTS?

Award recipients are encouraged to engage in mentorship, outreach and leadership development through STEP Ahead programming.

### IS TRAVEL REQUIRED?

Yes. Selected awardees are expected to attend the Leadership Conference and Awards Gala. The 2026 STEP Ahead Leadership Conference and Gala will be held in Washington, D.C. on April 22–23, 2026. Employers are encouraged to support their nominee's participation.



### HOW CAN MY COMPANY SUPPORT THIS INITIATIVE?

Companies can support the 2026 STEP Ahead Awards by becoming event sponsors. Sponsorships help underwrite the cost of the Leadership Conference and Awards Gala, while also demonstrating your company's commitment to recognizing talent and building supportive workplaces in manufacturing.

Sponsorship opportunities include:

- Table reservations (each table seats up to 10 guests)
- Brand visibility during the event
- Recognition in event materials and signage
- Opportunities to highlight your company's leaders and awardees

To learn more about sponsorship levels and benefits, please contact Rachael Scheffler at [RScheffler@nam.org](mailto:RScheffler@nam.org). Sponsorship packages are limited and tend to fill quickly—early interest is encouraged.

### HOW CAN INDIVIDUALS PURCHASE TICKETS FOR THE STEP AHEAD AWARDS GALA?

There are three options to attend the STEP Ahead Awards Gala:

- A limited number of **individual tickets** will be available for purchase. Details and the ticketing link will be shared closer to the event date.
- Companies can secure **tables** (10 seats per table) by becoming event sponsors. For more information, please contact Rachael Scheffler at [RScheffler@nam.org](mailto:RScheffler@nam.org).
- **Honorees, Emerging Leaders and Champions** each receive one **complimentary ticket** to attend the gala. They will also have access to discounted guest tickets for immediate family members (limit 3). Details and instructions will be shared directly with awardees upon selection.

### WHY IS ROSIE THE RIVETER A KEY FIGURE FOR STEP AHEAD?

Rosie the Riveter represents more than just a historical icon—she stands as a symbol of strength, skill and the critical role individuals play in powering American manufacturing. During World War II, Rosie broke barriers and reshaped what the manufacturing workforce could look like. Today, she continues to inspire a new generation of leaders.

STEP Ahead builds on Rosie's legacy by recognizing those who are helping build a workforce where everyone can thrive. Rosie reminds us that manufacturing has always depended on the contributions of individuals who step up—and that the future of the industry depends on continuing that spirit.



## STEP Ahead Alumni Community

### WHAT IS THE STEP AHEAD ALUMNI COMMUNITY?

The STEP Ahead Alumni Community is a national network of past award recipients who are committed to paying it forward to support their peers in manufacturing. Through ongoing events, networking opportunities and professional development programs, alumni stay connected, share best practices and collaborate to strengthen the manufacturing workforce.

### WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR THE STEP AHEAD ALUMNI COMMUNITY?

The STEP Ahead Alumni Community is composed of past awardees who have been recognized through the STEP Ahead or Women MAKE Awards. All recipients—including Emerging Leaders, Honorees and Champions, from any award year—are automatically welcomed into this nationwide network.

### IF I AM A FORMER WOMEN MAKE AMERICA AWARDEE, AM I STILL INCLUDED IN THE STEP AHEAD ALUMNI NETWORK?

Yes. Women MAKE America was the name for STEP Ahead from 2022–2025. If you received a Women MAKE America award during that time, you are considered a STEP Ahead alumni and remain part of the alumni community.

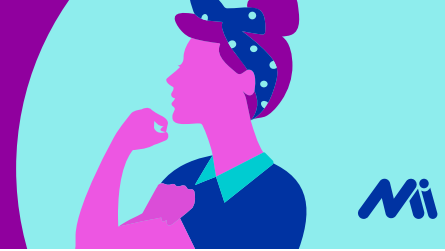
## Need Help?

### I HAVE A QUESTION THAT'S NOT LISTED HERE. WHO CAN I CONTACT?

Reach out to the STEP Ahead Team at [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org) or (202) 637-3426.

## Section 4

# Nomination Best Practices: Company Spotlights



### BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

## AGCO Internal Awards Nominations Process

### SYNOPSIS

In order to put its best applicants forward, AGCO Corporation implemented a company-wide nomination process to select which employees will be nominated for the [STEP Ahead] Award. The company created a nomination form on its internal system that mimics the official [STEP Ahead] Awards nomination form. To spread the word, AGCO promoted the [STEP Ahead] Awards and its internal nomination form to its Global Women's Network, posted articles with the link to the form on its intranet home page and distributed an email to all AGCO employees in early August with a request for nominations by September 16.

After receiving 52 nominations for 30 different individuals, two AGCO employees evaluated the nominations and reduced the list to 20 possible candidates. The two employees then organized the list by Emerging Leader and Honoree candidates and created a scorecard for evaluation. Emerging Leader candidates were ranked from 1-4 given the low volume of nominees. Honoree candidates were ranked on a scale of 1-10. Scores were consolidated, and the top Emerging Leader candidate and top four Honoree candidates were chosen for official entry.



### GOAL

Streamline a process to nominate the best possible candidates for the [STEP Ahead] Awards.



### TIME COMMITMENT

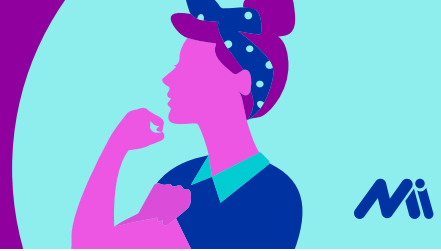
AGCO dedicated two employees to implement the internal nomination process, promote the awards, refine the submissions and officially nominate the candidates. The overall process took approximately 15 hours over one month to complete.



### OUTCOME

AGCO officially nominated five individuals, and the Manufacturing Institute selected two.





### BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

## Steps for Implementation



#### STEP 1

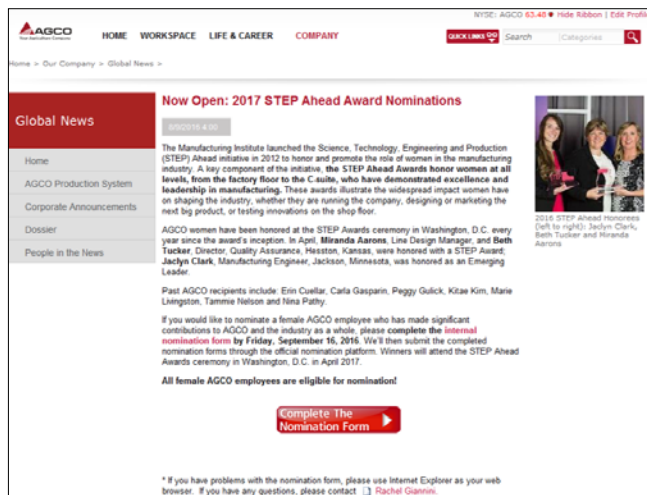
Promote the [STEP Ahead] Awards to the internal women's network, affinity groups, etc.

#### STEP 2

Create an internal nomination form that mimics the official nomination form.

#### STEP 3

Post an article with a link to the nomination form on the home page of your intranet, or send via email. Request nominations before the national nominations are due, allowing time for evaluation and national nomination.



#### STEP 4

Evaluate the nominations and reduce the list to a smaller number of possible candidates.

#### STEP 5

Organize nominations into Emerging Leader and Honoree candidates.

#### STEP 6

Create scorecard for evaluation using a shared excel document. Use internal review to rate the nominations 1-10 in the four various categories, aligned to the national nominations. You may also use a different rate value, such as ranking the nominations, if given a low volume of nominees.

#### STEP 7

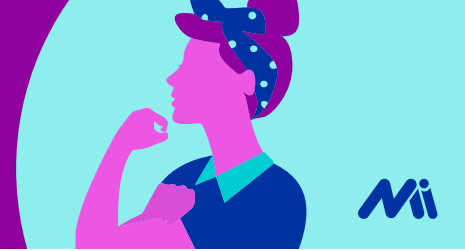
Assign a single person to consolidate scores. The top Emerging Leader candidate and top Honoree candidates are then chosen for official entry. Please note, only two Emerging Leaders and two Honorees are able to be selected for the national award.

#### STEP 8

Refine selected nominations and officially submit using a single point of contact as the nominator. This person should be able to liaise with the communications/public affairs and human resources team at the company.

#### STEP 9

Share recognition via intranet, press release and social media.



### BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

## Behlen Internal Awards Nominations Process

### SYNOPSIS

Behlen Mfg. Co., a medium-sized manufacturer in steel fabrication, has participated in the Manufacturing Institute's [STEP Ahead] Awards every year to recognize and increase the visibility of its leaders. The company's [STEP Ahead] alumnae have continued to meet each year to select a worthy candidate to nominate for the award.



### TIME COMMITMENT

The [STEP Ahead] Awards alumnae group, which consists of five individuals, spends two to three hours discussing the nominee list and meeting with leadership. The writing and approval of the nomination application takes up to one month.



### OUTCOME

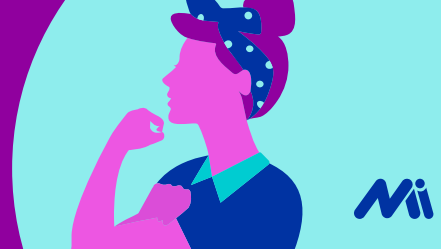
The Behlen leadership team sees the value of employing retention and recruitment strategies by participating in the [STEP Ahead] Awards.



### GOAL

Streamline a process to nominate the best possible candidates for the [STEP Ahead] Awards.





### BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

## Steps for Implementation



#### STEP 1

When the Manufacturing Institute's [STEP Ahead] Award nominations open, a notice is sent out to Behlen awards alumnae two weeks in advance of meeting as a reminder to prepare and bring a list of individuals to discuss as potential nominees. They review the criteria and the nominations application before meeting to understand what the Institute is looking for in the award winners.

#### STEP 2

The Behlen alumnae group meets for one to two hours to discuss worthy candidates to nominate. The group examines the pros and cons of each person and comes to an agreement on one person to nominate.

#### STEP 3

The selected individual is presented to the leadership team for approval.

#### STEP 4

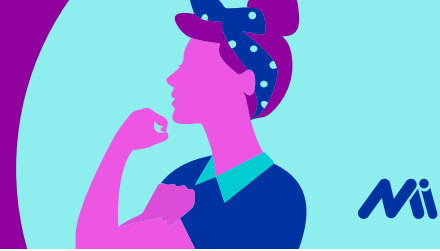
Once approved, the awards alumnae will set a meeting to interview the nominee with questions that resemble the [STEP Ahead] Awards application. This process will take approximately one week to formulate the questions and schedule the interview.

#### STEP 5

An internal communications staff member will help write the nomination. Behlen employees have one month to write, edit and show the written nomination to the leadership team before submitting.

#### STEP 6

If selected, the nominee is notified. The rest of the company will be notified after the public announcement in March.



### BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

## Toyota Internal Awards Nominations Process

### SYNOPSIS

Toyota participates in the Manufacturing Institute's [STEP Ahead] Awards to recognize its employees who are making great accomplishments in their careers and use the recognition as a motivator to showcase what others are capable of achieving. As a large corporation with locations throughout the United States and across the globe, the multinational company created an internal process to nominate candidates for the [STEP Ahead] Awards that allows Toyota to avoid duplicate applications being submitted and put forth their best and brightest candidates for the award.



### GOAL

Streamline a process to nominate the best possible candidates for the [STEP Ahead] Awards.



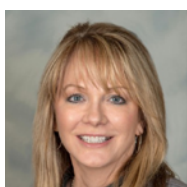
### TIME COMMITMENT

The company dedicates 20 hours of time in total. This time is spent over two months through four employees to complete the process. One HR employee manages the email distributions and initial reviews, and three plant presidents serve on the executive committee to review the nominations and choose the final applicants.



### OUTCOME

The number of officially submitted applicants varies year to year based on how large the pool is and the quality of candidates. For the 2018 Awards, Toyota submitted four Honoree applications and three Emerging Leader applications. The maximum per company was selected.



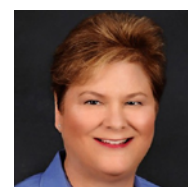
**LEAH CURRY**

Plant President  
2013 STEP Ahead  
Honoree



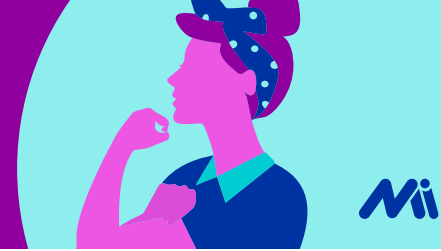
**SUSAN ELKINGTON**

Plant President  
2014 STEP Ahead  
Honoree



**MILLIE MARSHALL**

Plant President  
2014 STEP Ahead  
Honoree



### BEST PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

## Steps for Implementation



#### STEP 1

Create a nomination review executive committee and/or confirm previous participants will again volunteer to be a part of the internal review process.

#### STEP 2

Develop an email communication on [STEP Ahead] Award nominations to send out to all plant presidents and HR department heads in manufacturing, along with other groups, directly linking to manufacturing. Indicate in the email the internal company nominations due date as one month prior to the official Manufacturing Institute deadline. The email will include a nomination form in a word document that mirrors the Manufacturing Institute nomination form.

#### STEP 3

Coordinate with all necessary departments to approve and review this email communication.

#### STEP 4

Nominations are returned to Toyota HR representative by the internal deadline.

#### STEP 5

Toyota HR representative reviews the nomination submissions and separates the candidates into the Emerging Leader and Honoree categories.

#### STEP 6

Toyota HR representative ensures all applications include all necessary information and the appropriate word count.

#### STEP 7

Toyota HR representative reviews and documents internal performance ratings of all submitted nominees.

#### STEP 8

Toyota HR representative distributes the nomination submissions and a matrix with performance scores to the internal executive committee, which includes three plant presidents who are all Awards alumnae.

#### STEP 9

Toyota HR representative coordinates a meeting/conference call with the executive committee to discuss the nominations and come to a consensus on who they would like to officially nominate. The executive committee is asked to come to the meeting with their top three choices in each category.

#### STEP 10

Once the final candidates are chosen, the Toyota HR representative submits officially through the Institute's nominations website as the sole point of contact for the Institute.

#### STEP 11

Toyota HR representative will send a pre-notification when the Institute sends out the notice on who did and did not get selected.

#### STEP 12

Toyota HR representative manages all [STEP Ahead] Award information, communications and sponsorship, as a sole contact for both the Institute and Toyota.

**Section 5**

# Sample Essays



## Sample Essays—Honoree Candidate

*Note: Individual and company names have been removed.*

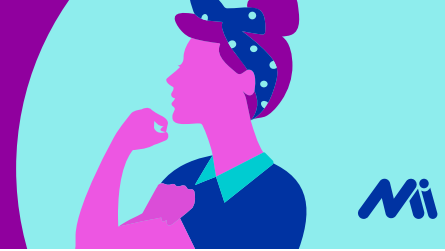
**Describe a significant accomplishment or contribution the nominee has made within their organization.** What did they do, how did they do it and why was it impactful? This can include technical achievements, business results, innovation or operational excellence.

JULIA oversees COMPANY's largest, most complex and highly integrated production site, managing 30 production units that generate over 4,000 unique products. These materials supply 23 downstream plants globally and contribute to 80% of the business's revenue. In her role as the site leader, JULIA has built a diverse and high-performing team, advancing STATE operations' competitiveness by challenging existing practices, enhancing the efficiency of the industrial park and leveraging internal company expertise. The site has recently achieved its best safety and reliability performance, fostering downstream growth and ensuring a consistent supply to customers. Additionally, JULIA is responsible for overseeing COMPANY's other northern sites in the US and Canada, offering continuous support in crisis management and resources. Previously as site director for STATE operations and global environmental, health and safety director for COMPANY's industrial solutions business, JULIA spearheaded an improvement program for ethylene oxide. This initiative significantly improved worker health, process and personal safety and emissions reduction. She also played a key role in educating employees, industrial partners, STATE's department of environmental protection and the community about the company's efforts to maintain best-in-class operations for EO. JULIA revamped the Community Advisory Panel to further build that trust/partnership and to find wins for the company and the community.

**How has the nominee demonstrated leadership by shaping a strong workplace culture and supporting the growth of others?** Please share a specific example of how they have built supportive teams, fostered collaboration or created an environment where others feel valued and supported. Highlight any efforts to mentor, coach or advocate for colleagues or emerging talent.

Since beginning her career as an engineer in 2004, JULIA has been a member of the Society of Women Engineers and the company's women's employee resource group, working to recruit and retain female talent. As JULIA's career progressed, she has pulled up other female leaders behind her and has diversified her own leadership team due to the value she sees in it. She has participated in corporate programs focused on promoting female and minority talent within COMPANY as well as through her own extensive network. She has helped retain several female leaders by finding flexible solutions for them. Recently JULIA invited Ernst & Young to co-host a session for over 100 females and male allies at her site. Many enlightened and inspired participants returned to their core roles determined to make a difference.

Beyond mentoring, JULIA is an advocate for nursing moms. She has shared her own experience nursing while traveling for work and while working in manufacturing locations with the manufacturing leadership team. JULIA continues to share COMPANY's resources for nursing mothers with her teams so that leaders can help employees take advantage of the company's benefits for nursing moms. By doing this, JULIA has increased awareness of the accommodations that can help mothers continue to nurse their babies after returning to work. She enables them to not have to choose between work and family. Her candor and leadership style drives the culture change needed to advance the value of diversity.



**How does your nominee engage with the broader community?** This may include volunteering, civic engagement or youth outreach.

Outside of work, JULIA serves as the vice president and co-founder of NONPROFIT. The nonprofit's goals are to educate the community about pancreatic cancer, provide support for those affected and improve survival rates. JULIA's dedication to this cause began after her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and passed away two months later at the age of 52. Over the past eight years, NONPROFIT has raised and contributed over \$80,000 to pancreatic cancer research while also increasing awareness of this deadly disease, which often lacks early detection methods. In addition to her work with the nonprofit, JULIA actively participates in community activities related to her workplace. She currently serves on the executive steering team for NONPROFIT, aiming for a goal of \$1.25 million this year. In STATE, she hosted fundraisers at her home to support the local campaign. JULIA also takes part in annual volunteer events such as the EVENT, focusing on environmental cleanup. JULIA has partnered with the minor league baseball team in CITY on immediate response to ensure people in the stadium would be protected from any emergency. Through these efforts, JULIA exemplifies her company's commitment to community involvement for employees at her sites.

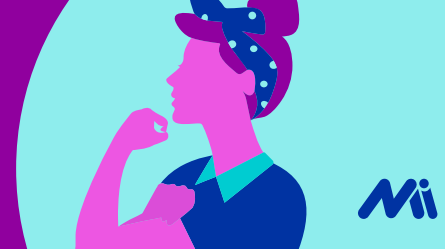
**Why should this individual be selected as an Honoree?** Reflect on their overall impact—inside and outside of the organization—and how they embody the values of leadership, mentorship and manufacturing excellence.

JULIA should be selected as an Honoree in recognition of her remarkable career as a leader within COMPANY, her service mindset toward paying it forward to other women, her being a role model for young leaders and her outstanding commitment to getting the best team on the field. JULIA recognizes the importance of retaining top female talent and will work toward creative solutions to alleviate challenging personal situations. She has held manufacturing roles at seven sites, in five states and two countries. JULIA has built a consistent track record for getting results and is regularly sought after for the tough roles. She lives the company's values and works to bring out the best in her people and those with whom she collaborates.

At the same time JULIA is a beacon of personal development and achievement despite the demands of a young family outside of work. She effortlessly balances her professional excellence with her responsibilities as a parent, setting an extraordinary example for others in similar situations. Her ability to thrive in both areas of her life is a testament to her resilience and determination.

In summary, JULIA embodies true leadership and advocacy for women in engineering. Her initiatives, mentorship and sponsorship have advanced many careers and contributed to a more supportive workplace. Honoring her with this award will recognize her significant contributions and inspire others, furthering diversity and inclusion in the industry.





## Sample Essays—Emerging Leader Candidate

*Note: Individual and company names have been removed.*

**Describe a significant accomplishment or contribution the nominee has made within their organization.** What did they do, how did they do it and why was it impactful? This can include technical achievements, business results, innovation or operational excellence.

In her relatively short tenure (5 years), ASHLEY has made significant contributions to COMPANY. She led the implementation of a new product in AREA OF BUSINESS within a 3-month timeframe, across 3 locations without any issues in manufacturing. This product is now being produced at 9MM/lbs per year for a very important customer.

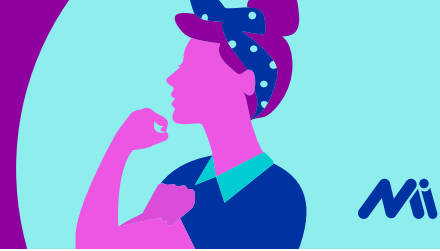
ASHLEY also led a quality improvement effort at COMPANY's STATE plant, using her Six Sigma Green Belt certification skills. This product had been in ongoing development, requiring additional technical support from the R&D, industrialization and production teams for 10 years! ASHLEY was able to use her skills as a project manager to lead a very diverse, multifunctional team in implementing actions which resulted in a major improvement from only 60% of usable product to 100% of prime material.

In ASHLEY's prior role as TITLE at the STATE site, she led a reactor recommissioning project increasing annual capacity by 10%, which helped the plant meet the growing business needs. Her work on the project included: proposing designs that improved the safety and operability of the unit, managing the project through installation and working with R&D for all scale ups and product approvals.

**How has the nominee demonstrated leadership by shaping a strong workplace culture and supporting the growth of others?** Please share a specific example of how they have built supportive teams, fostered collaboration or created an environment where others feel valued and supported. Highlight any efforts to mentor, coach or advocate for colleagues or emerging talent.

ASHLEY invests her time and takes pride in identifying, mentoring and growing the next generation of talent. She routinely acts as a mentor for COMPANY's "Developing Engineers", the new graduate program which was her entry point to COMPANY. Currently, she is mentoring four engineers across different manufacturing locations. ASHLEY shares her experience with them, helps them navigate the experience of adjusting to life in the workforce, brainstorms ideas for projects and connects them with colleagues. In addition to supporting this program, she also provides specific technical mentoring to the engineers at the sites she works most closely with. This is focused on troubleshooting manufacturing issues, reducing quality concerns and non-prime production.

As the CITY, STATE site champion for EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUP, ASHLEY supports various engagement and growth initiatives for female employees. One example this year was organizing a career panel discussion for women to share their experiences throughout their careers at COMPANY. The highly attended virtual event received very positive feedback.



ASHLEY also leverages her network at several manufacturing sites to grow participation of women from manufacturing sites in EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUP. She also helps identify what topics women in these roles are most interested in.

ASHLEY also engages with the next generation of talent at her alma mater, UNIVERSITY. Through her leadership, COMPANY is now connected to UNIVERSITY's Women in Engineering group and supports its annual scholarship program. She is also a co-lead recruiter for COMPANY at UNIVERSITY.

**How does your nominee engage with the broader community? This may include volunteering, civic engagement or youth outreach.**

ASHLEY has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to her local community. Most recently she supported her local Habitat for Humanity over the past year and a half – more specifically, their annual Women's Build. During these volunteer sessions, ASHLEY participated in the building of affordable housing for less fortunate members of the community. She assisted in the installation of an exterior insulation board, installed framing for a front porch and other miscellaneous construction tasks. Beyond Habitat, ASHLEY also volunteered at NONPROFIT in nearby CITY, which provides community and good for all, regardless of means.

In addition to her individual engagement, ASHLEY leads the local chapter of EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUP at the CITY, STATE site, which includes organizing volunteer opportunities for employees in the group. A recent initiative collected supplies for a local women's shelter – which included items the shelter desperately needed like food, feminine products, cleaning supplies and in season clothing.

Before moving to STATE in early 2023, ASHLEY was a TITLE at COMPANY's CITY, STATE site, where she was on the service committee including volunteering for fundraising events. She also volunteer with COMPANY's Science Teacher program, which provides resources, science curriculum and ongoing mentorship to local elementary school teachers.

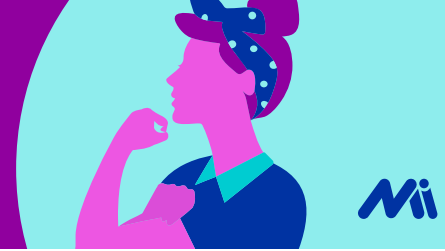
**Why should this individual be selected as an Emerging Leader? Reflect on their overall impact – inside and outside of the organization – and how they embody the values of leadership, mentorship and manufacturing excellence.**

ASHLEY is a proven leader and mentor and an excellent example of an engineer who meets the criteria for the Emerging Leader award. In her short tenure, she has implemented projects which provide significant positive impact at multiple manufacturing locations at COMPANY. She has shown the ability to work with, and lead, individuals from a diversity of backgrounds, experience and education – demonstrating a maturity beyond her years of service.

In addition, ASHLEY has shown her commitment to not only develop herself – but also the next generation of female talent through her efforts recruiting, mentoring and leading EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUP.

She also has a passion for and takes pride in service to her community.

I cannot think of a more qualified and accomplished individual than ASHLEY to receive this award. I feel she would be an excellence role model to inspire future generations to consider a career in manufacturing.



## Sample Essays – Champion Candidate

*Note: Individual and company names have been removed.*

**How does the nominee demonstrate visible allyship in their workplace.** Describe how the nominee actively supports and advocates for colleagues. Include examples such as sponsorship and efforts to change the status quo.

JEFF consistently demonstrates a strong commitment to empowering others and fostering an inclusive workplace culture at COMPANY. He was a staunch advocate for women's leadership, ensuring they had opportunities to take on leadership roles both internally and externally. His leadership paved the way for two Vice Presidents, who later became Presidents at different North American manufacturing companies, showcasing his lasting impact on elevating others into leadership positions.

As a mentor and sponsor, JEFF went above and beyond to support high-achieving individuals. A prime example is his sponsorship of INDIVIDUAL, where he provided strategic cross-functional assignments. JEFF didn't just assign roles, he expanded INDIVIDUAL's leadership experience by advocating for her rotation to COUNTRY, offering valuable global exposure. He took a similar approach with others, personally guiding them through developmental opportunities to broaden their leadership capabilities.

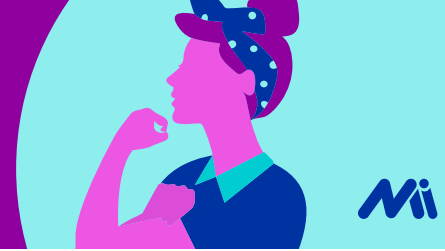
Beyond mentoring, JEFF actively supports the advancement of others by participating in ERG events, Women in Manufacturing (WiM) meetings and summits. He is outspoken about the need for sponsorship, speaking at events aimed at other male leaders. His participation reflects his belief in the importance of diversity and his commitment to creating an inclusive, supportive environment for everyone in manufacturing.

**What specific actions has the nominee taken to create a more positive and supportive culture?**

Share examples of how the nominee fosters collaboration, builds strong teams and ensures others feel valued and supported.

JEFF possesses an extraordinary talent for identifying untapped potential in his mentees and empowering them to surpass their own expectations. Through strategic cross-functional and stretch assignments, he creates transformative opportunities that challenge individuals to step beyond their comfort zones and into roles they may not have envisioned for themselves, fostering growth and building confidence. He does so by advocating for his capable mentees, especially when they are not present in a room full of opportunity.

JEFF's approach is not merely about task delegation; it is about intentional professional development that paves the way for new leadership opportunities and a new way of thinking. As a trusted mentor, JEFF believes his duties extend beyond being a supporter and advocate. He cultivates confidence by providing a two-way business relationship that ensures accessibility to his expertise at any time. He reserves time for regular "on-the-job development", navigating growth at the source and offering guidance as situations arise, making his mentorship an ongoing process.



JEFF's commitment extends beyond career advancement; he fosters an environment where women are recognized, valued and equipped to lead in the manufacturing field. His innovative and impactful approach to mentoring is a testament to his unwavering dedication to their empowerment and creating a more inclusive future for leadership in manufacturing.

**How does the nominee engage with their broader community?** Highlight the nominee's contributions to community initiatives.

JEFF is a passionate advocate for community engagement and workforce development, particularly in creating opportunities for nontraditional groups, including women. He actively partners with several key organizations, including NONPROFIT, where he serves as a board member and advocate. Through these roles, JEFF ensures that women have access to vital growth and leadership opportunities in the industry. He encourages senior managers and executives to participate in external initiatives and serve on boards, inspiring leaders to expand their influence and share their expertise. This approach aligned with his allyship with NONPROFIT, an organization dedicated to empowering women to take on leadership roles as board directors.

JEFF also takes a strategic approach by identifying valuable external networks and programs, such as UNIVERSITY CENTER, that provide women with opportunities to enhance their leadership potential and professional growth. He believes that fostering leadership opportunities in these high-level networks is essential to empowering women to reach their full potential.

A standout contribution in JEFF's career is his support of a female executive in the development of a program with the local university. This program, now a benchmark across COMPANY, is a testament to JEFF's leadership in fostering innovative educational initiatives that focus on investing in the workforce of the future. Through this program, he bridges the gap between academia and the manufacturing industry, providing students with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in modern manufacturing.

He is also dedicated to future talent pipelines, speaking at universities like UNIVERSITY and UNIVERSITY, recruiting new talent to the field.

**Why should this individual be selected as a Champion?** Reflect on their overall influence – inside and outside of the organization – and how they embody the values of allyship, mentorship and supportive leadership in manufacturing.

JEFF exemplifies what it means to be a Champion: someone who doesn't just support behind the scenes, but leads visible, sustained efforts to shift workplace culture, open doors and build lasting systems of support. His influence is not confined to one team or initiative – he has shaped leadership pipelines, corporate culture and community partnerships in ways that will outlast his own tenure.

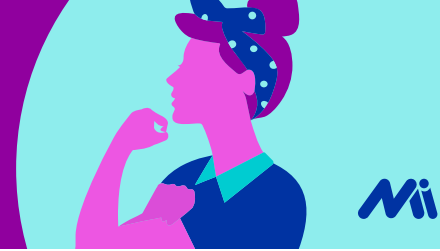


Throughout his career, JEFF has modeled proactive allyship by identifying and developing high-potential individuals, advocating for their advancement even when they are not in the room. His sponsorship has propelled women into executive roles. What makes his approach distinctive is its intentionality. JEFF doesn't wait for formal programs to drive change – he creates the conditions for it to thrive, whether through stretch assignments, ERG engagement or reimagining what mentorship looks like.

Beyond his own organization, JEFF champions inclusion across the industry. From helping launch a workforce program with UNIVERSITY, to speaking at national forums and recruiting future talent, he sees allyship as an active, ongoing responsibility. JEFF embodies the values of STEP Ahead: he sponsors, mentors and builds. He listens, learns and leads. Most of all, he shows that allyship in manufacturing isn't about checking a box – it's about transforming a culture. That's the legacy he's building, and why he is so deserving of recognition as a Champion.

## Section 6

# Meet the Team



**CAROLYN LEE**

President and  
Executive Director

Carolyn Lee is the president and executive director of the Manufacturing Institute, the 501(c)3 nonprofit workforce development and education affiliate of the National Association of Manufacturers.

Mrs. Lee leads the MI in its goal of building a resilient manufacturing workforce prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future. She was named to the leadership role at the MI in 2017, and during her leadership tenure, the MI has grown significantly, evolving for scaled impact nationwide across the manufacturing industry.



**LEXI CHAMPION**

National Director, STEP Ahead

Lexi Champion is the national director of STEP Ahead, an initiative of the Manufacturing Institute dedicated to supporting women and allies in the manufacturing workforce. In this role, Ms. Champion leads strategy and execution of programs that support leaders across the manufacturing industry, including leadership development, mentorship and the annual STEP Ahead Awards.

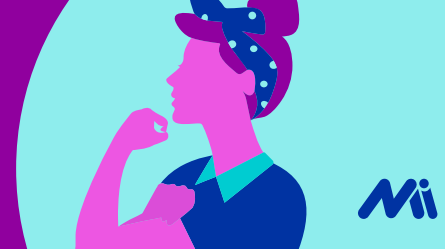


**SABRINA ZARIFI**

Senior Manager, STEP Ahead

Sabrina Zarifi is the senior manager of STEP Ahead at the Manufacturing Institute, where she manages the initiative's mentorship programs and alumni engagement efforts. In this role, she designs and delivers programs that foster leadership development, build meaningful connections and amplify the impact of leaders in manufacturing. Through her work, Ms. Zarifi helps cultivate a thriving network of leaders whose collaboration and shared expertise strengthen the manufacturing workforce of today and inspire the next generation to pursue careers in the industry.





**KATIE HARKER**  
Senior Manager and  
Operations Team Lead

Katie Harker is the senior manager and operations team Lead at the Manufacturing Institute. In her role, Ms. Harker leads the Institute's growing operations team, works collaboratively with the program leads to execute events and builds and strengthens internal systems to support the entire MI team.



**IRYNA TIASKO**  
Events and Special  
Projects Associate

Iryna Tiasko is the events and special projects associate at the Manufacturing Institute. Ms. Tiasko supports MI's flagship events and webinars, works on continual process improvement to drive efficiencies and supports cross-functional projects within the institute.



**BRIKITI YOHANNES**  
Operations Associate

Brikiti Yohannes is the operations associate at the Manufacturing Institute. Ms. Yohannes is responsible for streamlining operations and event planning. She also provides administrative and systems support through HQ-based events, contract processing and financial reporting.



NOMINATION PERIOD

Tuesday, September 2–  
Friday, October 10, 2025

Nominate

