

# **STEP AHEAD**

## **2026 AWARDS**

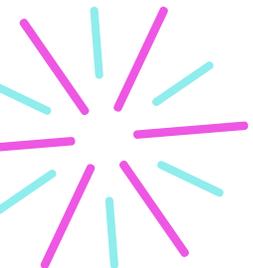
**Awardee Guide**





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## **STEP AHEAD** 2026 AWARDS

### **About the STEP Ahead Initiative**

STEP Ahead strengthens the modern manufacturing workforce by supporting the workers leading the industry at every level—from the shop floor to the C-suite. By ensuring manufacturers have the resources, networks and leadership development opportunities to help their leaders thrive, STEP Ahead helps manufacturers attract and retain the key talent they need to succeed. Through leadership development, mentorship and community building, STEP Ahead helps individuals build successful careers in manufacturing while strengthening the industry’s future.



### **About the Manufacturing Institute**

The Manufacturing Institute helps build a manufacturing workforce prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Through implementing groundbreaking programs, convening industry leaders and conducting innovative research, the MI furthers individual opportunity, community prosperity and a more competitive manufacturing industry. As the 501(c)(3) nonprofit workforce development and education affiliate of the [National Association of Manufacturers](#), the MI is a trusted adviser to manufacturers, equipping them with solutions to address the toughest workforce issues.

For more information, please visit <https://themanufacturinginstitute.org/>.



## Flagship Programs

The STEP Ahead initiative features several interconnected components:

### STEP AHEAD AWARDS

The STEP Ahead Awards honor exceptional individuals in manufacturing who lead by example and strengthen their workplaces. Each year, nearly 1,000 nominations are submitted from across the country. From this highly competitive pool, just 100 Honorees, 30 Emerging Leaders and 15 Champions are recognized as standout individuals making a lasting impact. The Awards gala brings together over 800 guests who attend to recognize these awardees—the very best talent in manufacturing.



### STEP AHEAD AWARDS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

The Leadership Conference brings together leaders from across the country to connect, share and learn from each other. It's a catalyst for action. Participants leave with new tools, new networks and a renewed sense of purpose, ready to continue driving changes in their organizations and across the industry.

### STEP FORWARD

STEP Ahead offers virtual events so that women and allies can hear from and connect with each other. Each session is tailored to achieve a specific goal, whether it's hearing perspectives of leaders in the manufacturing industry, learning new methods or tools to apply to personal and professional development or simply bringing leaders together to meet each other.

### STEP AHEAD MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

Mentorship is a powerful mechanism for growth and success. The STEP Ahead Mentorship Program is designed to foster meaningful connections, help individuals navigate challenges and cultivate the next generation of leaders. By passing on wisdom, offering guidance and creating a network of support, mentors not only uplift individuals but also strengthen the entire manufacturing workforce.



## Registering to Attend the Event

*Directions: Please review the following directions before you begin, as there is no option to “save for later” during the process. Changes may be made once you have completed the process; however, you must complete all steps initially in one sitting.*

### ABOUT THE INFORMATION WE'RE REQUESTING

As an awardee, the details you provide will be used across every part of the STEP Ahead experience—from how your name is engraved on your award to how you're introduced on stage, featured in the Awardee Profile Book and recognized in public announcements. To ensure we celebrate you accurately and respectfully, it's essential that all information—especially your name, title, company and phonetic pronunciation—is submitted exactly as you would like it to appear. Please review each step carefully before submitting, as these details directly shape your recognition during the gala and in all official materials.

### Step One: Register for the Event

To accept your award, please complete your acceptance online through the link in your email or use [this link](#).

#### IMPORTANT INFORMATION

If you are not able to attend the activities in April but would still like to accept the award, you **must** still complete the requested information in the link above.

Please enter your name, title and company **exactly** as you would like them to appear on your award and in the program materials, including phonetic pronunciation.

**The deadline for accepting the award is Friday, Jan. 30, 2026.**

### Step Two: Submit Information for Your Awardee Profile

You will be required to upload a headshot and your name, title and company exactly as you would like them to appear on your award and in event materials.

1. Please select the award category indicated in your congratulatory email when entering your information online.

Honoree

Emerging Leader

Champion



2. Provide the phonetic pronunciation of your name.

- Help us honor you accurately by submitting the phonetic pronunciation of your name for use during the gala program.

3. Upload a headshot.

- Please see the “Selecting a Profile Picture” section for more information on picture size and resolution requirements.

4. Provide a brief response to **either** of the following prompts (in 50 words or less).

- Prompt 1: I am motivated by ...
- Prompt 2: I hope to inspire the next generation by ...

5. Confirm your name, title and company.

- The email you received asked you to confirm your name, title and company exactly as you would like them to appear in the event materials.
- Although you must accept your award and submit your information by Friday, January 30, 2026, you may make edits or updates until Friday, February 13, 2026. After that date, we are unable to make any edits as event materials will be in production.

6. Review your pre-drafted profile.

- The email you received included your pre-drafted profile attached as a Word document. This profile is a summary of your accomplishments in your company and community as described by your nominator. Your profile will be included in the 2026 STEP Ahead Awards Profile Book, which will be housed on the MI’s website for open viewing.
- If you make edits to your profile, please upload your revised version during the registration process.
- If no edits are required, please upload the original document attached to your award acceptance email.

**Awardee Profile Information**

\* Awardee Type (as listed in your congratulatory email)

\* Please enter the phonetic pronunciation (i.e., Julia Bradshaw, joo-lee-ah brad-shaw, Pina Jimenez, pee-ah-jeez-lee-mee-eh) of your first and last name to ensure it is enunciated correctly in our program.

Please upload an MP4 audio recording of your first and last name to ensure it is enunciated correctly in our program. You can find instructions on how to create a recording using your phone here: [Click and follow](#). Once recorded, you can email the file to yourself and download the file to attach below (optional).

Upload file

Please copy the link to your LinkedIn profile

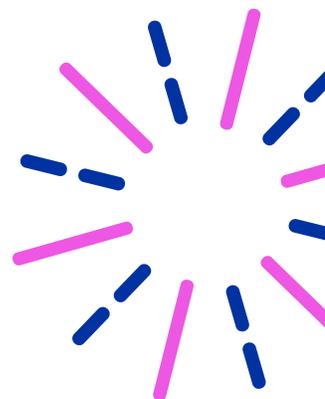
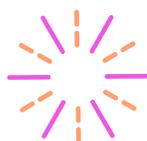
Please list your company's X handle:

Please respond to one or both of the following prompts (in 50 words or less) that will be used in program materials. For the prompt you do not select, please write "N/A".

\* I am motivated by:

\* I hope to inspire the next generation by:

If you have any questions, please contact [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org).





### Step Three: Register for the Leadership Program

The link provided in step one will allow you to accept the award as well as register for the STEP Ahead Leadership Conference, which begins on Wednesday, April 22, 2026. Through the Leadership Conference, awardees and other manufacturing leaders will gather in Washington, D.C., for an opportunity to share best practices, develop their personal and professional strengths, network with peers and create a plan to continue to pay it forward for the next generation.

The program includes general sessions as well as several breakouts. You can find the full Leadership Conference program on [pages 8–10](#).

### Selecting a Profile Picture

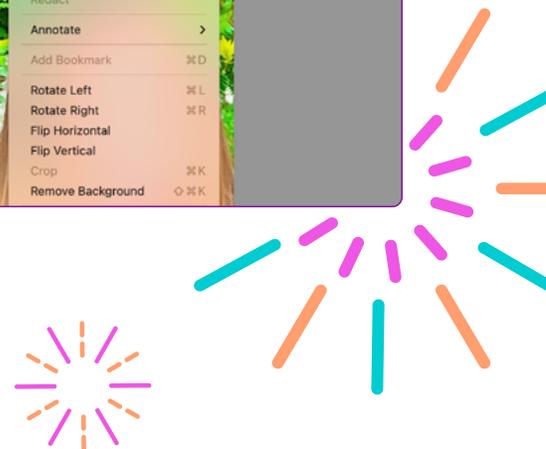
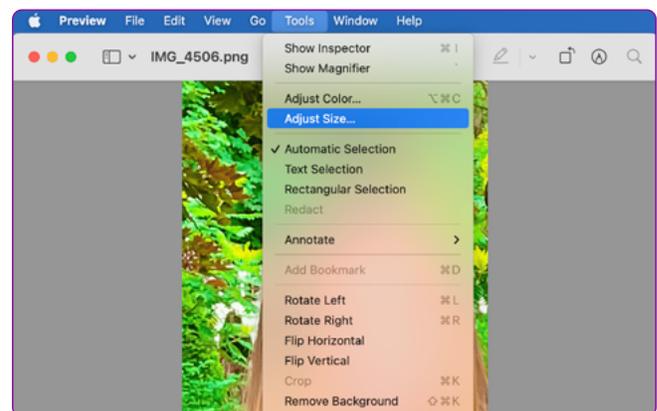
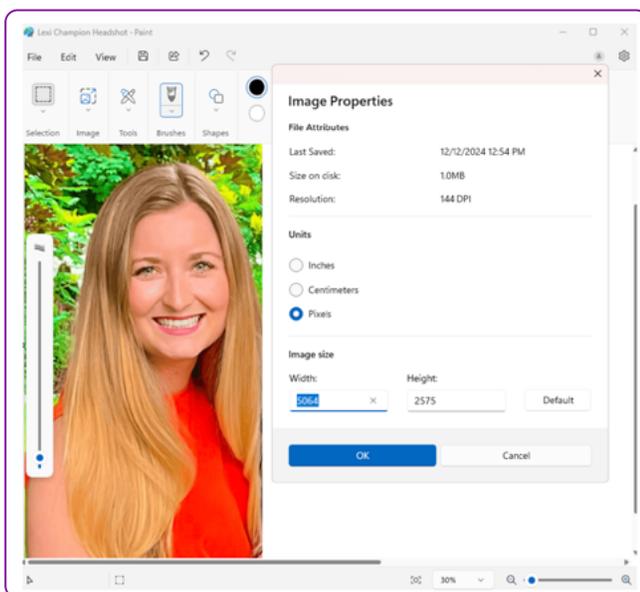
A high-resolution photo is required for display in printed materials and to enlarge on digital screens on stage. Your photo must have a minimum resolution of 300 dpi (dots per inch) or ppi (pixels per inch). To check the resolution of your photo, please follow these instructions:

#### PC:

Open your photo in Paint > click File > click Image Properties

#### MAC:

Open your photo in Preview > click Tools > click Adjust Size





## 2026 STEP Ahead Awards and Leadership Conference Agenda

Salamander Washington, D.C.

### APRIL 22, 2026

11:00 a.m.     **Registration Opens**

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11:30 a.m.     **Welcome Lunch** | Gallery BC

Kick off the conference by connecting with fellow STEP Ahead awardees and guests. Hear opening remarks from MI President and Executive Director Carolyn Lee, as we set the tone for two days of connection, reflection and action.

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12:30 p.m.     **The Power of Culture in Manufacturing** | Grand Ballroom

**CAROLYN LEE, PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE MANUFACTURING INSTITUTE**

Strong workplace cultures don't just retain talent—they drive innovation, trust and performance. In this session, we'll explore how every leader, at every level, can influence culture to help their organization thrive.

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1:00 p.m.     **Reading the Room: The Intelligence That Elevates Every Interaction** | Grand Ballroom

**DALE WILSHER, EXECUTIVE COACH, YOUR AUTHENTIC PERSONALITY**

Today's workplace is full of shifting expectations, various personalities and constant change, making the ability to understand others critical for communication, trust and performance. Reading the Room introduces the intelligences that reveal the patterns behind human behavior, from how people think and work to how they respond under pressure. Grounded in real-world application, this session equips both leaders and individual contributors to interpret cues quickly, communicate with clarity and foster environments of trust, psychological safety and collaboration.

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2:00 p.m.     **Networking Break** | Grand Foyer

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2:30 p.m.     **Discover and Leverage Your Strengths** | Gallery Ballroom A

Breakouts

**LISA CUMMINGS, FOUNDER AND CEO, LEAD THROUGH STRENGTHS**

Understanding what you naturally do best is the first step toward leading with confidence and authenticity. In this interactive session, you'll work directly with your CliftonStrengths results to identify your top talents and learn how they influence your communication, collaboration and problem-solving. You'll explore strategies to maximize your impact at work, leverage your strengths in team settings and confidently take on new opportunities.

**EQ-i 2.0** | Grand Ballroom

**WANDA ERINLE, CEO AND PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT, WE CONSULTING SOLUTIONS LLC**

Leadership starts with self-awareness. In this session, you'll dive into your EQ-i 2.0 results to understand how your emotional intelligence shapes your interactions, decision-making and influence as a leader. You'll explore your personal EQ profile, identify areas of strength and uncover opportunities for growth. Through interactive exercises and reflection, you'll learn practical strategies to strengthen empathy, build stronger relationships and lead your team with clarity and confidence.



### APRIL 22, 2026 (CONTINUED)

- 4:00 p.m. Mentorship** | Grand Ballroom  
**PATRICIA HUME, EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN, CANVAS GFX, INC.**  
Learn how to find mentors, activate sponsors and build relationships that accelerate your growth and success.
- 
- 5:00 p.m. Rosie Reports Part I** | Grand Ballroom  
In this Ted Talk–style session, presenters will share how they discovered and refined their leadership styles—and how they’ve used those strengths to lead and support others along the way.
- 
- 5:30 p.m. Reception** | Grand Foyer  
Celebrate the first day of learning and connection over light bites and drinks.  
**STEP Ahead Philanthropic Activity** | Hillwood Foyer  
Leaders in manufacturing don't just drive innovation in the workplace—they also uplift their communities. As a STEP Ahead awardee, you are recognized for your leadership in the industry as well as your dedication to making an impact beyond the workplace. At this hands-on service event, you will come together with your fellow awardees to give back to the community in a meaningful way.

### APRIL 23, 2026

- 6:30 a.m. Sunrise Yoga** | Grand Lawn  
Begin your day with intention and energy through a guided yoga session designed for all levels. Move, stretch and breathe as you cultivate focus, balance and calm.  
**Morning Walk to the Jefferson Memorial**  
Start your day with fresh air and conversation. Join fellow STEP Ahead awardees for a 45-minute walk to the iconic Jefferson Memorial and back. Enjoy the opportunity to connect, share experiences and take in one of D.C.’s most inspiring landmarks in a relaxed, informal setting. We will depart the lobby of the Salamander promptly at 6:30 a.m.
- 
- 8:00 a.m. Breakfast** | Gallery Ballroom BC
- 
- 8:45 a.m. Paying It Forward** | Grand Ballroom  
**LEXI CHAMPION, NATIONAL DIRECTOR, STEP AHEAD, THE MANUFACTURING INSTITUTE**  
As STEP Ahead Award recipients, you’ve demonstrated leadership, resilience and a commitment to uplifting others in manufacturing. This interactive session explores the ripple effect of support—how small, intentional actions can create lasting impact. Through reflection and discussion, identify the moments when others supported you and commit to ways you’ll extend that same support to others.
- 
- 9:30 a.m. Confident Communication and Negotiation** | Grand Ballroom  
**JOAN MOON, NEGOTIATION TRAINER AND CONSULTANT, MOON NEGOTIATION, LLC**  
Strengthen your ability to communicate with clarity and influence. Learn proven negotiation techniques that help you advocate for yourself and others while fostering collaboration and trust.



### APRIL 23, 2026 (CONTINUED)

- 11:00 a.m. Breakouts**
- Conquering Imposter Syndrome and Navigating Career Growth** | Gallery Ballroom A  
**DALE WILSHER, EXECUTIVE COACH, YOUR AUTHENTIC PERSONALITY**  
Everyone experiences self-doubt, but it doesn't have to hold you back. Learn how to reframe uncertainty, speak to your strengths and pursue advancement.
- Leading Through Change and Uncertainty** | Grand Ballroom  
**MELISSA BOOM, PRESIDENT AND OWNER, BOOM CONSULTING, LLC**  
Gain tools for leading teams through transformation, technology adoption and market shifts. Learn how to communicate with transparency, sustain morale and turn uncertainty into opportunity.
- 
- 12:00 p.m. Lunch** | Gallery Ballroom BC
- 
- 1:00 p.m. Rosie Reports Part II** | Grand Ballroom  
In this Ted Talk-style session, presenters will share how they discovered and refined their leadership styles—and how they've used those strengths to lead and support others along the way.
- 
- 1:30 p.m. Executive Panel: The Ripple Effect of Support** | Grand Ballroom  
Real stories from across the industry highlight how mentorship, allyship and belief from others fuel success—and why these relationships are critical to a thriving manufacturing sector. This candid conversation will share actionable insights on how to lead effectively, achieve balance and foster a culture of support and excellence.
- 
- 2:30 p.m. Closing** | Grand Ballroom  
**CAROLYN LEE, PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE MANUFACTURING INSTITUTE**  
A final moment to reflect on lessons learned, new commitments and the power of leadership in forging manufacturing's future.

### STEP AHEAD AWARDS GALA AND DINNER

- 6:00 p.m. Awards Gala** | The Anthem DC  
Celebrate the 2026 STEP Ahead Honorees, Emerging Leaders and Champions at the signature gala event. Transportation to The Anthem will be provided. Family and guests are welcome with the purchase of a dinner ticket.
- 
- 9:00 p.m. Afterparty** | Salamander Washington, D.C. | Gallery Ballroom  
Keep the celebration going with music, dancing and camaraderie among industry peers.



## Hotel Information

2026 STEP Ahead awardees and guests are welcome to stay at the Salamander Washington, D.C. We are pleased to share that hotel rooms for the event are available at a discounted rate.

The discounted room rates are as follows:

Tuesday, April 21	\$439 + tax
Wednesday, April 22	\$439 + tax
Thursday, April 23	\$439 + tax

The cutoff date for reservations within this discounted block is **Monday, March 30**. However, once the block is full—which may happen before the cutoff date—room rate and availability are not guaranteed. We strongly encourage you to make your reservations early.

To make your hotel arrangements at the Salamander in Washington, D.C., [click here](#) or call **(877) 401-9818** and ask for the “**2026 MI STEP Ahead Awards**” group room rate. Registrants are responsible for making and canceling their own hotel room reservations. All reservations must be guaranteed with a major credit card.

### HOTEL CANCELLATION POLICY:

Reservations can be canceled up to 24 hours prior to arrival without penalty. If you cancel within 24 hours of your scheduled arrival, a cancellation fee equal to one night’s room revenue will be charged.

**Hotel Check-In:** 4:00 p.m.

**Hotel Check-Out:** 11:00 a.m.

### HOTEL PARKING INFORMATION:

The Salamander Washington, D.C. is the nearest hotel parking garage to the National Mall in Southwest D.C. Guests and non-guests of the hotel can enjoy all-day parking in D.C. near the Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial and National Mall.



# STEP AHEAD

## 2026 AWARDS



- Hotel valet parking is available for all guests 24 hours daily.
- Guests may call for their vehicle at least 10 minutes prior to departure.

### PARKING RATES:

0-2 hours – \$44.00  
2-8 hours – \$56.00  
8+ hours / daily and overnight parking – \$79.00

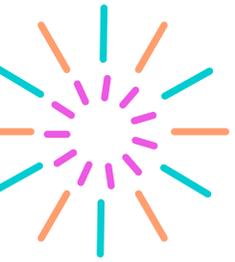
For more information on parking, please call.

### LOCAL TRANSPORTATION HUBS:

Guests have convenient access to major transportation hubs, including Ronald Reagan International Airport (DCA) within a 12-minute drive and Union Station within a 15-minute drive. Additionally, the local Washington, D.C., metro train stations are only blocks away, at the Smithsonian Station (two blocks) and L'Enfant Plaza Station (three blocks).

### CONTACT INFORMATION:

For hotel questions or assistance, please contact us at [registration@nam.org](mailto:registration@nam.org).





## Gala Ticket Information

The STEP Ahead Awards on Thursday, April 23, 2026, and is a ticketed event. As a 2026 STEP Ahead awardee, your attendance is complimentary. Please reserve your complimentary ticket as an awardee through the online system here: [Reception and Gala Tickets](#).

We are pleased to offer a discounted rate for up to three family members, as defined by the Family and Medical Leave Act. Qualified family members include child, spouse, partner, sibling or parent.

### IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Many companies elect to purchase a company table in support of their awardee. Before purchasing personal guest tickets, please coordinate with your nominator (identified in your award notification email) to understand your company's seating plans and to avoid duplicate tickets. You can email [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org) if you are unsure whom from your team to contact.

For more information on sponsorship opportunities, please contact MI Assistant Vice President of Partnerships and Philanthropy Rachael Scheffler at [RScheffler@nam.org](mailto:RScheffler@nam.org). For general ticketing information, please email [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org).

## Attire

### WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2026

Day Session and Reception: Business Casual

### THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2026

Day Session: Business Casual

Gala and Afterparty: Business/Semiformal

#### What Is Business Casual?

Business casual includes pants, slacks and skirts, short- and long-sleeved shirts and dresses. It excludes tennis shoes, t-shirts and sweatshirts/athletic attire.

#### What Is Business/Semiformal?

Examples of business and semiformal attire include business suits, cocktail dresses, dressy skirts and tops and slacks with dressy blouses.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### STEP AHEAD AWARDS AND LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

#### When will you announce publicly the selected awardees for the 2026 STEP Ahead Awards?

All awardees are notified of their selection in early January 2026. An official public announcement of the 2026 STEP Ahead awardees will be made on March 9, 2026. Your company's communications contact will have access to a media kit to amplify the MI's national announcement.

#### How many individuals will be honored?

The STEP Ahead Awards recognize 100 individuals as Honorees, 30 individuals as Emerging Leaders and 15 individuals as Champions.

#### What should I bring to the Leadership Conference?

All relevant materials will be provided. If your breakout session requires a preassessment, please complete it before the Leadership Conference. You may also want to bring business cards or use your phone to capture contact information of fellow awardees.

#### Who can attend the STEP Ahead Awards?

The 2026 STEP Ahead Awards is a ticketed event. All individuals, companies and organizations that recognize the importance of supporting women and allies in the manufacturing industry are welcome to attend the event. Many awardees also choose to bring family members. For ticketing information, please contact [STEPAhead@nam.org](mailto:STEPAhead@nam.org).

#### Do I need to prepare remarks?

Awardees do not need to prepare a speech or interview responses. The evening is for you to relax, celebrate and enjoy your well-deserved recognition.

#### Is there anything for my family to do while I am occupied at the Leadership Conference?

Washington, D.C., offers a variety of great tourist attractions! Visit the sites below for information about activities your family can check out while you are attending the Leadership Conference.

- [Free Things to Do: Best of Washington, DC](#)
- [Washington, D.C. Monuments by Moonlight Tour by Trolley](#)

### PROGRAM AND AWARDS BACKGROUND

#### What is 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 individuals 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.



### How are awardees selected?

Awardees are nominated by their peers or company officials. Nominators are asked to articulate how the nominee made significant achievements in their company and community. Each nomination is reviewed by an external group of prior awardees (STEP Ahead Alumni) and rated on a numerical scale by multiple reviewers.

### 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.

### I have a question that is 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.

### PRESS

#### When will the 2026 STEP Ahead awardees be announced?

On March 9, 2026, the MI will publish a press release announcing the 2026 STEP Ahead awardees. All STEP Ahead press releases will be posted on the MI’s website on the press page as they are released, as well as shared through our social media channels. Additionally, all awardee profiles will be added to the MI’s website by March 9, 2026.

#### When can I post about the 2026 STEP Ahead Awards?

Please hold off on posting anything publicly until after the public announcement on March 9, 2026. We will equip communications contacts with a media kit that they can use to make any awardee announcements.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

**STEP Ahead LinkedIn:** [STEP Ahead](#)  
**MI X, Instagram and Facebook handle:** @TheMFGInstitute

The NAM will also be tweeting (@ShopFloorNAM) and posting news items on their Facebook page. Connect with their [Facebook page](#) and repost content.





## Meet the Team



### CAROLYN LEE

President and  
Executive Director

Carolyn is president and executive director of the MI. Since 2017, she has led the MI's rapid national growth through initiatives like FAME USA and Heroes MAKE America. The MI is a trusted adviser to manufacturers, delivering solutions and knowledge of how to address critical workforce challenges and empowering individuals and communities. Raised in a manufacturing family, Lee is driven to expand pathways to opportunity and enhance U.S. competitiveness. She began her career on Capitol Hill and has held roles at the NAM, 3M and the Telecommunications Industry Association.



### LEXI CHAMPION

National Director, STEP Ahead

Lexi is the national director of STEP Ahead at the MI. In this role, she leads initiatives aimed at closing the skills gap in manufacturing, empowering women and allies to excel and take on leadership positions within the manufacturing industry.



### SABRINA ZARIFI

Senior Manager, STEP Ahead

Sabrina is the senior manager of STEP Ahead at the MI, where she focuses on closing the skills gap by engaging program alumni and overseeing the mentorship program. Through this program, she helps foster meaningful connections between experienced professionals and emerging leaders, providing guidance to support women and allies in manufacturing.



## KATIE HARKER

Senior Manager and  
Operations Team Lead

Katie is the senior manager and operations team lead at the MI. In her current role, she leads the MI's growing operations team, works collaboratively with the program leads to execute external-facing events and builds and strengthens internal systems to support the entire MI team.



## IRYNA TIASKO

Events and Special  
Projects Associate

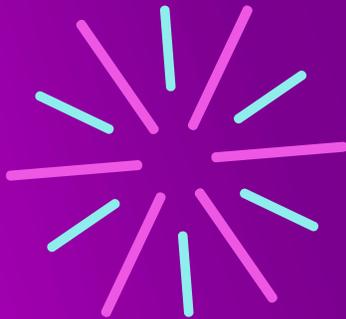
Iryna is the events and special projects associate at the MI. In her current role, she supports the MI's flagship events and webinars, works on continual process improvements to drive efficiencies and supports cross-functional projects within the MI.



## BRIKITI YOHANNES

Operations Associate

Brikiti is the operations associate at the MI. In her current role, she is responsible for streamlining operations and event planning. She also provides administrative and systems support through headquarters-based events, contract processing and financial reporting.



CONNECT WITH US



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