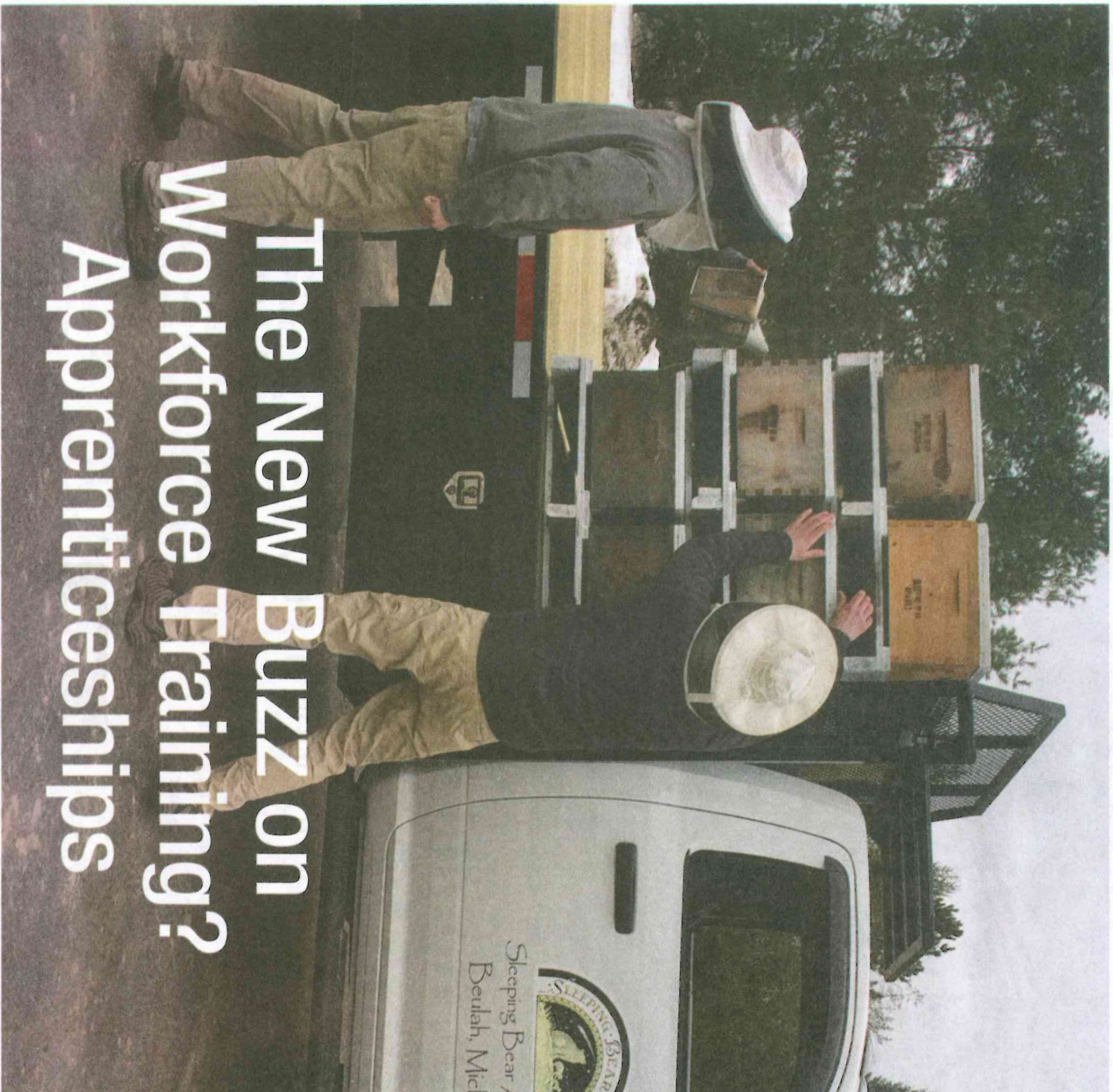


EDUCATION & TRAINING



The New Buzz on Workforce Training? Apprenticeships

Sleeping Bear Apiaries employs two apprentices who are learning the bee business through a three-year, in-depth program.

BY AMYLANE

At Sleeping Bear Apiaries, tending to more than 7,000 beehives annually takes skill and knowledge. Building both is the aim of a unique beekeeping apprenticeship program that has its first two employee participants.

“Beekeeping is our primary business,” said Susan Kile, chief financial officer at the Benzie County enterprise that also encompasses honey products maker Sleeping Bear Farms and St. Ambrose Cellars. “And with the things going on with bees today and the number of diseases, problems that they can run into ... we wanted to make sure that our guys had the latest and greatest

information about what’s happening out there. We want them to be as knowledgeable as possible as to what they see ... what to look for, what’s causing the problem, how to get it corrected.”

In a variety of industries, employers in the region have been teaming up with workforce development agency Northwest Michigan Works! to craft U.S. Department of Labor-registered apprenticeships – training programs geared toward meeting employer needs for skilled workers.

From wine making to injection molding, and entry-level carpentry to administrative posts like office manager, the registered apprenticeships combine on-the-job and academic or technical

instruction, tailored to the skills and knowledge base the employer wants the apprentice to learn.

“It’s very specific to the needs of every employer, and can be customized as appropriate,” said Evelyn Szpliet, Northwest Michigan Works! apprenticeship success coordinator.

Take growing plastic chain manufacturer M R Products Inc. in Copemish. The business, whose trade name is Mr. Chain, recently created an apprenticeship that will advance an existing employee from machine operator to foreman. The two-year injection molding machine setter program encompasses 4,000 hours of on-the-job learning and nearly 300 classroom hours. It covers

the gamut of operations including troubleshooting; learning to make mold, color and material changes; machine cleaning, maintenance and programming; safety; and product scheduling.

“It was difficult to find anybody with the experience ... more than [the] machine operator,” said Carol

“I feel like the apprentice’s skills are only as good as the time you’re willing to invest in developing that person.”

– Mike Laing,
winemaker,
L. Mawby Vineyards

Mathias, human resources manager. She said the company is looking toward succession planning and its future, and sees apprenticeships as an avenue to trained employees in a number of areas.

After beginning the injection molding apprenticeship last year, the company is now launching a four-year maintenance apprenticeship that will take an employee through a broad array of subjects including electronics, hydraulics and pneumatics, heating and cooling, welding, machine repairs and industrial electricity.

Mathias said the apprenticeship will provide thorough knowledge and “experience geared toward what we have here, plastic injection machines.”

She said the “nice thing” with the apprenticeship program is that the apprentice will be trained specifically for M R Products’ needs.

The company is eyeing additional possibilities, like apprenticeships in logistics and office positions, and hopes to start one new apprentice every year.

“I think it will make us more stable in the future, just having those trained people who will help make us more efficient, more productive,” Mathias said.

Apprenticeships are an employer commitment that can include paying both wages and tuition while the

apprentice is working, and designating a mentor to oversee on-the-job performance and the progression of coursework, which might be delivered through community colleges, trade schools, universities, industry organizations and online providers.



Laina



Szpliet



Burns



Mathias

“The majority of apprenticeships are one mentor to one apprentice,” said Szpliet at Northwest Michigan Works! “Employers commit someone who is trained in that occupation, to guide the new apprentice.”

At L. Mawby Vineyards in Suttons Bay, an apprenticeship is paving the way for winemaker Mike Laina to transition into other roles and mentor a fellow Mawby winemaker who will take over Laina’s job. Laina, who learned winemaking from founder Larry Mawby and became the winemaker for the M. Lawrence line of sparkling wines, said it’s important for a mentor to be committed and engaged.

“I feel like the apprentice’s skills are only as good as the time you’re willing to invest in developing that person,” Laina said.

He oversees the two-year apprenticeship, which includes training in Mawby winemaking processes and proficiencies and online classes, through the Viticulture Enology Science and Technology Alliance, a national grape and wine education program.

Laina said such apprenticeships can benefit the industry by training

“those capable and interested into quality winemakers” who can heighten the excellence and renown of wines coming from the region.

Wine and other beverages like beer, cider, distilled liquor and mead are among products that can fall under a Northwest Michigan Works! focus on apprenticeships in the craft beverage industry. Another industry target is construction: The agency last fall launched a construction trades apprenticeship program incorporating elements toward a credential as entry-level carpenter.

“With so many workers aging out of the professional trades, and a limited amount of new applicants, apprenticeship is a way to address the increasing gap in the workforce,” Szpliet said.

Chris Mason, owner of Lakeshore Custom Homes in Beulah, has an employee going through the one-year apprenticeship program. It’s combining 2,000 hours of work-based learning – such as understanding the flow of materials on the job, building codes, and areas ranging from foundations to trim carpentry – with online training through the Scranton, Pa.-based Penn Foster Career School. The school’s online carpenter program includes study of topics like blueprint reading and site preparation; lumber, building materials and fasteners; framing for floors, stairs and walls; and hand and power tools.

Mason said he sees the apprenticeship program as an opportunity to build a broader base of knowledge, faster, in an employee.

“I think that this hopefully will speed the process up, in gaining that knowledge,” he said. Lakeshore does new construction and remodeling, primarily in Benzie, Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties.

Apprentices can come from within an employer’s workforce or be new hires. Northwest Michigan Works! can assist in recruiting apprentice candidates, help employers structure programs, submit apprenticeship registrations to the DOL and provide ongoing technical assistance and administrative support. The agency may also be able to help employers connect with funding possibilities to offset training costs.

Sleeping Bear Apiaries’ Kile said the workforce agency’s assistance in developing the beekeeper apprenticeships and intersecting with educational providers and the DOL was valuable.

“If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t be able to do it,” she said.

Kile said Sleeping Bear Apiaries, working with its master beekeeper/vice president of beekeeping operations, identified skill sets and knowledge it felt were important to achieve. She said the three-year program “goes through every aspect of beekeeping” and includes online coursework through the University of Montana, American Red Cross emergency healthcare training, and onsite instruction and mentoring.

“We set this up ... as a program that a person could go through who had never been a beekeeper before,” Kile said.

The apprentices, who are currently beekeepers, will at program completion earn certification as master beekeepers. The University of Montana courses begin with the basics of keeping honey bees, including bee biology, care and recognizing and treating bee ailments and pests, and progress into other areas like ecology, anatomy, flight, genetics, hive products, managing hives and the business of beekeeping.

The apprenticeships can add depth of knowledge in an enterprise dependent on bees not only for pollination – hives in the spring locate at hundreds of cherry and apple orchards in the region and winter in California and Florida – but also for Sleeping Bear Farm’s line of honey-based products and St. Ambrose Cellers’ mead.

Elsewhere at the company is an office manager apprenticeship and two just-completed St. Ambrose winemaker apprenticeships. “I think it’s important that you look at all of the skills that you need in your organization,” Kile said.

CREATING AN APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Registered apprenticeships will be in the spotlight later this month in Traverse City at a conference hosted by the Michigan Educators Apprenticeship & Training Associ-

ation, a group that includes secondary and post-secondary educators, workforce development agencies and professionals, and employers. The May 22-25 conference will include sessions on various aspects of apprenticeships and talent; success stories such as M R Products; keynote speaker Roger Curtis, director of the Michigan Department of Talent and Economic Development; and an “apprenticeship in a day” workshop that will take a select group of companies through the entire apprenticeship registration process and deliver signed DOL apprenticeship programs.

The workshop, open to all conference attendees, is a hands-on work session that brings employers together with representatives from Michigan Works! offices around the state, community colleges and the DOL, said Amy Burns Bailey, secretary of the MEATA executive committee. She is experiential learning program coordinator in the business and technical divisions at Northwestern Michigan College, which is helping sponsor and coordinate the conference.

Burns Bailey said those who attend the workshop will gain knowledge about each step of creating a registered apprenticeship program, and employers previously identified to go through the approval process that day will have the opportunity to leave with “launch-ready” apprenticeships.

She said the conference is open to MEATA members and non-members, and for businesses is “a great way” to network with K-12 and community college professionals and companies that are utilizing apprenticeships “to benefit their success.”

The conference will be at the Holiday Inn Resort West Bay Beach; attendance is limited to 150 people and registration information is on the MEATA website, at meata.org.

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