

By Emily Younger-Barnwell

From five high school interns in 2017 to more than 150 in 2023. Textron Aviation is home to Wichita's largest high school internship program.

It is part of the longtime aviation company's deliberate strategy, in collaboration with the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, to develop the region's talent pipeline.

Michele Gifford, the human resources director at Textron Aviation, explained talent initiatives such as internships are imperative in keeping pace with the company's attrition and the development of its future workforce.

She added community partnerships are key to the success of those initiatives.

"By working with K-12 schools, universities, colleges and technical schools to diversify their programs to include additional emphasis on industry needs, we're developing the next generation of innovators to understand what the future of aviation looks like," explained Gifford.



Cultivating the Next Generation of Innovators

Margaret Weihe, 18, and Jackson Patrick, 16, are the future. The pair, along with more than 150 other 16 through 19-year-olds from across the United States recently completed Textron Aviation's six-week summer internship program.

With more than 400 applicants in 2023, the paid program aims to provide students like Weihe and Patrick with a comprehensive employee experience, offering them the chance to work in various specialties within the company.

Weihe, a recent graduate of Valley Center High School, focused on interior engineering, specifically advancing seat design. Having previously completed another internship with Textron Aviation in the marketing department, she acknowledges the opportunities provided by the company. They not only honed her technical and soft skills but also influenced her future career path.

"I took a step outside my comfort zone and explored numerous areas in Textron Aviation through job shadowing until I eventually found design engineering. From there, I picked a college major in mechanical engineering and mapped out my professional goals," explained Weihe.

Patrick, entering his junior year at Halstead High School, concentrated on sheet-metal fabrication during his internship. He knew from the get-go, he wanted to pursue a career in aviation.

“I attended a career expo at the Kansas State Fairgrounds last November. Textron Aviation had a booth set up and it quickly caught my attention,” said Patrick. “When I had the chance to peruse aviation, I didn’t waste any time and I applied right away.”

During his time at Textron Aviation, Patrick learned to drill holes and shoot rivets into sheet metal, read blueprints and use a variety of measuring tools. He then used those transferrable skills to build his own toolbox.

“At Textron Aviation, we recognize that our success as a company is impacted by our ability to attract and retain highly skilled and professional employees,” Gifford explained. “The ultimate goal is to expose students to the career possibilities at Textron Aviation and for them to see a future here.”

Textron Aviation employs a handful of former interns. Weihe and Patrick told the Partnership they are interested in following suit.

“I would love to someday pursue a career in aviation because I love the challenge of designing amazing things while still making them light enough to fly,” Weihe expressed.

“It has helped me decide what I want to do and given me a boost for my future career. It has helped me build relationships

with people already in the field as well as within Textron Aviation, where I hope to work after I graduate," Patrick said.



Jackson Patrick

Whether the future is at Textron Aviation or at another Greater Wichita company, Gifford encourages all businesses to collaborate with the valuable resources and programs in the community to further develop the region's talent pipeline.

"There are many high school students in south-central Kansas who want to work and are willing to learn," she said. "Start with just one and see the excitement and innovation that these students bring to your business!"

Textron Aviation also offers paid college internships, Co-Ops and externship programs for educators. To explore current opportunities, click here.

Additional Internship/Work Opportunities:

Foley Equipment Post-Graduation Internship
Freddy's Summer Employment
KETCH - Aspire Higher
PEC Employment and Internships
Sedgwick County Public Works
Spirit AeroSystems Summer Internship
The Way to Work (TWTW) Summer Temporary/Part-Time Work
Wesley Heathcare
Wind Surge Internships



WSU National Institute for Aviation Research (NIAR)