

# West Michigan's Manufacturers Council Celebrates 30 years of Collaboration, Innovation and Progress

The Right Place | The Center – West  
**MANUFACTURERS COUNCIL**

When The Right Place, Inc. and a small group of local companies formed the Manufacturers Council in 1989, they united under a banner of collaboration and mutual trust. Now, 30 years later, The Right Place | The Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center – West's Manufacturers Council serves as a vast repository of industry knowledge and a cornerstone of the manufacturing sector in the region. Yet, despite its growth over the years, the council still retains its mission of encouraging collaboration and sharing best practices between manufacturers in West Michigan.

"That a council has existed like this for 30 years and that leadership is engaged at a high level from major to small companies is highly unusual," said Birgit Klohs, President and CEO of The Right Place, which facilitates the Manufacturers Council. "It's not an association, it's a group of like-minded collaborative individuals who want to share what they know with others. I think it speaks to West Michigan and how we work together."

Klohs also served as one of the founders of the Manufacturers Council, helping to breathe life and structure into the organization in 1989. Since then, the council has expanded to include numerous members of varying industries, who meet regularly and candidly discuss everything from best practices, to business challenges and trends. Every other month, the group embarks on an open-door plant tour of another member's facility, where they witness production processes and other key initiatives live.

"The Manufacturers Council brings together a group of manufacturers from the area and creates a forum for them where they can talk about issues that are affecting their companies," said David Beemer, the newly appointed president of the Manufacturers Council, who also serves as the COO of TerryBerry. "What's really refreshing from a membership standpoint is access to other people facing similar challenges and the collaborative nature that group takes to sharing that information."

While it may seem strange to some companies, members of the council are not concerned with discussing the ins and outs of their organizations with peers, Beemer said. Even though the council contains direct competitors, those competitors can often come together and collaborate under the banner of mutual benefit.

## EYES FORWARD

Even with 30 years under its belt, the Manufacturers Council has no plans of slowing down. Since the beginning, the council has always strived to look out and understand upcoming trends that will impact companies for years to come.

Specifically, the Manufacturers Council plans to focus its efforts on three key drivers of the manufacturing industry going forward including, Industry 4.0, automation, and talent attraction and development.

The Manufacturers Council is also actively involved in the Manufacturing Leadership Summit,

hosted by The Right Place and The Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center – West. This summit features best in class discussions on future trends and innovations in the manufacturing sector. It also offers manufacturers an opportunity to network and form relationships for future collaboration on a large scale.

"The knowledge is gathered but then you have to share it," Klohs said. "It doesn't do you any good if 30 companies know about it. You have to have the conversation at a regional level."

## A HISTORY OF COLLABORATION

The concepts of collaboration and innovation have served as the underpinnings of the Manufacturers Council since its modest beginnings in 1989. In those years, the council was comprised of a small number of like-minded manufacturers in the West Michigan area. While they came from different sectors, each

of the members joined the council with the same intent to share best practices.

"Joining the Manufacturers Council brought our community together from a manufacturing standpoint," said Jim Zawacki, the second chairman of the Manufacturers Council and former owner of GR Spring and Stamp. "We had a good cross section of automotive suppliers, medical suppliers, and so forth."

Zawacki noted that even from its earliest days, members of the council shared everything from the best book they read to operating practices and philosophies. In one case, a local manufacturer opened up a proprietary manufacturing process to the rest of the group, Zawacki said.

"It's that philosophy that if you're ahead of the game, you don't have to worry about people copying you," Zawacki said. "The Right Place helped us get ahead of the game by forming the Manufacturers Council."

## INTERESTED IN JOINING THE COUNCIL? HERE ARE SOME FIRST STEPS:

- Check out the website: [rightplace.org/manufacturerscouncil](http://rightplace.org/manufacturerscouncil)
- Understand the philosophy: The Manufacturers Council relies on companies that are engaged with the organization and willing to contribute to the overall knowledge of the group.
- Email: [Justine Burdette, burdettej@rightplace.org](mailto:justine.burdette@rightplace.org)