

FEATURED APPRENTICE

Rob Papale, Zierick Manufacturing Corporation | BY ALISON BUTLER

THE PATH OF A TOOLMAKER

From Legos to FIRST Robotics to
A Career in Manufacturing



Those who want to enter Zierick's Apprenticeship program go through a probationary period first. Here, new Journeyman Rob Papale works with probationer Omar Hernandez.

Rob Papale first realized he was interested in manufacturing while in high school at Saunders Trades and Technical High School in Westchester County. He joined the FIRST Robotics club at the school (see HV Mfg article on FIRST Robotics in this issue page 23) and was instantly hooked. "FIRST Robotics bridges the gap from Legos to the real world," Rob says. After high school, he attended Westchester Community College and later Manhattan College where he completed his bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. It was while he was at WCC that Rob found Zierick Manufacturing Corporation.

"I learned about the company from a classmate who was employed at Zierick. He would talk about the jobs he got to do, how he worked with his hands and cool machines. It sounded really exciting," Rob explains. Zierick Manufacturing Corporation designs and manufactures standard and custom electronic components and assembly equipment. Their processes include tool design, build and maintenance, stamping, plating and assembly.

When Rob started at Zierick in 2014, he was still attending college and the company appreciated how important this was to him and worked with his schedule by hiring him part-time. At first, because of classes Rob could only work one day a week during the semester but was able to add more hours during academic and summer breaks. As Joe Turcott, Finance and HR Manager for Zierick, explains, "Our work schedule is not your typical Monday through Friday, 9-5 anyway. We do a 4-day work week, 10 hours a day, allowing for a three-day weekend and the ability to get into work and home again without Westchester's notorious rush hour traffic."

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Rob Papale with Senior Toolmaker Mario Rojo and his new toolbox, a gift from the company.

Rob had completed his engineering degree and was learning the basics of becoming a Toolmaker when Johnnieanne Hansen, Vice President of Operations and Workforce Development at the Council of Industry, approached the company about the Apprenticeship Program in 2017. Zierick had been training Toolmakers in their own informal training program for years under Journeyman and Vice President of Engineering, Frank Lynster. Frank who was currently in charge of training new Toolmakers, had completed a Toolmaker apprenticeship program in the 1960's after taking an 8-hour aptitude test in high school. He recalls how the first company he worked for offered an apprenticeship program and turned out 2-3 Toolmakers per year with approximately a dozen employees in the program at any one time. When he came to Zierick in the 1980's his skill, knowledge, and enthusiasm for training led Zierick to be ripe for the opportunity when a formalized Apprenticeship Program came along.

Gretchen Zierick, President of Zierick Manufacturing Corporation, explains how Rob was chosen as Zierick's first apprentice, "I was impressed with Rob's energy and drive and knew he would be a good candidate for the apprenticeship position. Frank gave him the nickname of Turbo because he is always going so fast."

Rob did his part to live up to that nickname, "When Frank and Gretchen first told me about the program, we looked at it and I was already on track and had several of the requirements. I was, and still am, eager to learn as much as Frank can teach."

Part of the program consists of related instruction, online or in-classroom training in more theoretical or knowledge-based aspects of the trades. There are many ways to satisfy the required 144 hours a year of related instruction and Rob chose to use the Tooling U subscription provided by the Council of Industry and take classes in CI's Certificate in Manufacturing Leadership Program at WCC. "I liked that Tooling U and the Leadership classes were an outside resource for my training. I was able to learn more about press operation on machines that are different from the ones we have at Zierick. The classes offered a lot of insight and prepared me to think about the future." Another advantage of the formalized program is

the credential awarded upon completion issued by the Department of Labor and nationally recognized. It is similar to a Journeyman card recognized by unions in that it certifies the holder's skill and knowledge in that trade wherever they choose to work.

During the On-the-Job Training portion, it was Rob's mentor Frank that really made an impression. When Rob started, he didn't know much. "Frank was very patient and willing to repeat himself as many times as it took. He is old school and wouldn't let me skip any steps. I learned it is important to go through all of the motions," said Rob. "The company has been supportive, especially Gretchen who was very encouraging throughout the process." To celebrate the completion of his apprenticeship and the semi-retirement of Frank, Zierick held a pizza party. At the celebration, Rob was presented with a Gerstner & Sons wooden Journeyman's tool chest. "It is a really, really, nice toolbox, Toolmakers know this is the toolbox they want to get. I thought I would have to save up to afford one like this someday," said Rob.

"It was important that we celebrated this accomplishment in front of the entire company,"

explains Gretchen. "Not only did Rob complete his apprenticeship but Frank and our plant engineer Ken were retiring too." Frank has since moved to North Carolina but returns every other month to support Rob and the next round of apprentices at Zierick. The company culture inspires such dedication and loyalty that they have quite a few retirees that come into work one or two days a week and many more that show up for parties and celebrations. Employee's benefit from not only Zierick's flexible work hours and



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With his mentor Frank semi-retired and living in North Carolina, Rob often consults with Senior Toolmaker, Mario Rojo.

dedication to training and education, but also from their employee recognition program and fun events they hold throughout the year to build camaraderie. This spirit and enthusiasm are evident in Rob especially when he talks about what is next for him.

Now that Rob has his Toolmaker certification his new title is Toolmaker/Engineer. He wants to learn die design and eventually be a tool designer. He is currently working on troubleshooting. According to Frank, “Troubleshooting is a skill that is hard to teach and it takes a lot of time to learn. Now I give Rob all the tools that don’t work so he can develop his critical thinking and problem-solving skills.”

Rob is also interested in passing on the skills he has learned. Currently, his bench is next to a future apprentice and he enjoys working and teaching others. “It’s nice to teach my co-workers because there is so much work out there and it feels good to work as a team,” Rob explains. He would like to eventually be the Vice President of Engineering, following in his mentor’s footsteps, and inspire the next line of apprentice Toolmakers.

Zierick is doing its part to find future employees and possible apprentices. They run a summer internship program for students 18 and older. As part of this program, they have interns working

on real-life problems, doing work on projects and giving a presentation on what they have learned and accomplished. One recent intern is now working at Zierick full-time.

The company also encourages young people to “come by for a visit” as Joe says. He doesn’t like to call it an interview but prefers to have them visit whenever it’s convenient for them and get a tour of the facility. “If they like what they see and seem like a good fit then we will sit down for a conversation,” Joe explains. The apprenticeship program through the Council of Industry has been a boon to Zierick in training their future workforce. Gretchen explains how she has wanted to formalize an apprenticeship program since she hired Frank almost 40 years ago. Both

Gretchen and Joe agree that once Zierick started advertising jobs as apprenticeships or added apprentice to the job title or description the volume of resumes increased.

As for determining who would be a good candidate for an apprenticeship, Frank recommends looking for someone that likes to work with their hands, enjoys learning something new and wants to continue to learn. They also need to be dedicated because there is no substitute for doing the actual work.

The end result, as Rob can attest to is very satisfying. “There is always something new to learn and you will always have a job. It is never boring, and you are continually moving up the ladder.”

Alison Butler is the Director of Member Engagement at the Council of Industry.



The New York State Manufacturers Intermediary Apprenticeship Program (MIAP) is administered in the Hudson Valley by the Council of Industry and is an employer-led public-private program [www.councilofindustry.org/apprentice-program] for registered apprentices in manufacturing occupations. This apprenticeship has two basic elements. The first, On-the-Job Training (OJT), consists of a journey-level, craft person capable and willing to share their experience with an apprentice, in a hands-on manner. The second, Related Instruction (RI), consists of learning more theoretical or knowledge-based aspects of a craft. This registered apprentice program typically runs 16 months to four years in duration.



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