

**MEG
DAY**

A CAREER RIGHT OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

Karen Triano Golin

At 19 Dylan Abbandando's career as a maintenance technician is progressing nicely, and he's only just getting started. A graduate of Penn Manor in Millersville, he spent his senior year in the Career and Technology Center's (CTC) electromechanical technology program.

The program prepares students in the application of basic engineering principles and technical skills in both mechanical and electrical fields. Instruction includes design, development, testing, and repair of electromechanical devices and systems and analysis of engineering data as well as how to prepare system test result reports.

Advance Food Products (AFP) Maintenance Superintendent Chuck Mastriana and Project Engineer Mike Rogers entered the picture when they visited the CTC to recruit. Of the roughly 40 students in the class, five or six were interested in AFP's internship program. Mastriana and Rogers ultimately selected Abbandando.

This was AFP's first internship and a new experience for all involved. Mastriana says looking for certain skills at the school was important, but personality was key as well to make sure of the fit within the plant's culture.

Following the CTC curriculum,

Abbandando's time increased gradually in phases from one day a week to four. The classroom component was conducted at the CTC, and he worked closely with Rogers for the first few months to learn his way around the electrical systems and programming. He was hired full-time in June 2018 after graduation.

"It was a lot different than the classroom," Abbandando says. "Working in an industrial area is more complex. There's more ways to make mistakes. I got thrown into all the real stuff."

AFP creates high-quality food products for a range of market segments. Mastriana explains that the manufacturing process

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is different and more involved than most other places. "Even for a seasoned mechanic it takes five to six years until they feel comfortable working by themselves, if necessary, and they still won't know everything at that point." As a co-packer they produce many different products on eight different lines which are not standardized on one format and require a great deal of variation in equipment.

Rogers says, "Most of the mechanics are line specific and there are hundreds of different machines. Everyone does general maintenance, but are usually attached to a specialized area."

This is Abbandando's path as well.

After his initial exposure he began floating with three or four mechanics for hands-on instruction of various lines, but has recently started working regularly on a brand new flex line, the first of its kind in the U.S. The machine, a multi-step process, is more complicated than most of AFP's other equipment. While multiple people will assist, the preventative maintenance and upkeep will be his responsibility and an opportunity for him to have something of his own.

Not bad for a 19 year old right out of school.

Abbandando believes the CTC gave him a good basis, but realizes the industry is more multifaceted and can be dangerous. He takes care to be

conscious of his environment and aware around the electrical components and moving equipment. He knows this is all part of the job and never made him second guess his decision. "I try to be as careful as I can, but things do happen, and I knew that coming into the field."

Rogers clarifies, "While equipment has safety features some of those are temporarily removed to find an issue so you need to be mindful when you're testing something to make sure it's working properly."

Among the many daily bright spots are his co-workers, ability to learn whatever he'd like and opportunity for growth. He plans on moving up eventually when the time is right.

As to whether he would recommend this career, he replies with a very solid yes. "It's very satisfying if you like working with your hands. You're active most of the day."

On top of the fact that he graduated with no debt the career offers strong wages which Mastriana says have been increasing dramatically due to the skilled mechanic shortage.

His thoughts are backed up by Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Locally the median wage (half make more, half make less) is almost \$41,000. Growth over ten years is projected to be 9.5 percent, well above the county's overall rate of 6.8 percent. This translates into a

need for over 300 hires a year and employment opportunities.

If you're ready for a career as a maintenance technician, follow Abbandando's steps to success. Apply your mechanical aptitude and learn the basics, show up on time and be eager to learn with the right attitude. Mastriana and Rogers say they're happy to train candidates with these qualities.

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