

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Ben Funderburk

When Lebanon-based manufacturer DT Engineering became the first tenant of the industry partner space inside the new Robert W. Plaster Center for Advanced Manufacturing in the fall of 2022, it paid off almost immediately. The company found an experienced employee among the Ozarks Technical Community College students taking classes in the Plaster Manufacturing Center (PMC).

DT Engineering hired OTC student Ben Funderburk as a full-time automation technician just weeks after moving into the PMC.

Ben started his college career at a four-year university when he graduated from Ozark High School in 2017. Without a clear idea of what he wanted to study, he took a break after a semester and then decided to attend OTC to become an electrician. Before graduating, he landed a job at a local biopharmaceutical manufacturer.

"I built power and control systems, then I became interested in instrumentation," Ben said. "After getting a handle on that, I began looking at automation, which allows everything to work together."

A childhood friend helped foster Ben's curiosity about automation. The friend worked at an electrical supply company and allowed Ben to try things out in their automation training room.

"I felt like I was playing with really expensive toys," Ben said with a grin.

With a natural interest and knack for automation, Ben enrolled in the brand-new automation and robotics degree program at OTC in the fall of 2022.

DT Engineering moved into the industry-partner space a few months after the start of school and told instructors it was looking for someone to work at their operation in the PMC.

"Ben brought a lot of experience to the table," said Landon Vinson, OTC mechatronics instructor. "He was still working for his previous company, but DT Engineering made him an offer he couldn't refuse."

Now, Ben arrives at the PMC at 6 a.m. and works until 4 p.m. He clocks out for a few hours a day to attend class, just a few hundred feet from his workplace in the PMC.

Ben builds and tests automated pharmacies, which take orders, count pills and load medications into blister packs for customers. Besides the pharmaceutical equipment, Ben has also worked on equipment that installs truck beds for a local automotive accessory company. In addition, Ben worked on and installed a smart conveyor system for an egg company that pulls boxes off the line for inspection.

"When you start working with these devices and figure out what they are capable of, it really drives your curiosity," Ben said.

For a young man who started on a path for a bachelor's degree but quickly decided to go in a different direction, his education and career choices couldn't have been better.

"OTC has really worked out well for me," Ben said. "I feel fortunate. I was in the right place at the right time."

Ben plans to graduate in the spring of 2024 and continue his career at DT Engineering.



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