

IN CASE OF EXCELLENCE MAKE GLASS



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In November 2024, *The Manufacturer* hosted The Manufacturer MX Awards at a gala ceremony in Liverpool, with Sam Bennington winning Young Manufacturer of the Year. **Molly Cooper** sat down with him to find out about his route into manufacturing, his role at Encirc and the importance of having a mentor

To pursue a mechanical engineering degree at university was an easy choice for Sam Bennington. He always enjoyed understanding how things worked and from a young age, that meant taking things apart and putting them back together.

"I moved from university into manufacturing through a graduate scheme at the Cheshire Energy Hub, which was a great opportunity because

I got to explore working on rotation at a collection of companies to find which was the best fit for me," said Sam.

That best fit was to be found at glass manufacturer Encirc, winner of three awards at The Manufacturer MX Awards 2024, including the overall Manufacturer of the Year. Since leaving the graduate scheme almost six years ago, Sam has been progressing through various positions within the company and has been lucky to have found roles that he's enjoyed.

Highlights of the role

Currently, Sam works in the continuous improvement team, a key part of which is liaising closely with the engineering department. "Within the team we've got people from different backgrounds and levels of experience. Here, I'm able to use my engineering experience and focus on CAPEX projects around machinery installations and innovation for the production lines," he added.

For Sam, the main highlight of the role

is the variety of work involved. "I benefit from a great mix of technical and hands-on activity. I often work with different companies to design new machinery and fit that into our lines. I love designing and drawing on the PC, but being able to take that down onto the line, and see the parts that I have designed and installed myself, is what I really enjoy about the role," he said.

Entering the awards

Sam was encouraged by Head of Operations, Matthew Guixe and other members of senior management to enter The Manufacturer MX Awards. "When I started looking at what the awards involved, how to enter and the criteria, I knew it would be a good opportunity for me. The whole process, from writing an entry to the judging day, allowed me to reflect on my career, how I got to where I am and what I have achieved," he continued.

There is so much great young talent within the sector and by his own admission, Sam never expected to win and was surprised to hear his name called out on the night. "I was, and still am, over the moon to have won; it's great to have that recognition from the industry."

Sam encourages any young manufacturer within the sector to enter the awards in 2025. "It is such an amazing experience and even if you've only been in the industry for a few years, don't underestimate how far you may have come – which is a rewarding process in itself," he said. In addition, once an individual is chosen to pass through to the judging day and then onto the awards evening, it is a great chance to network with many like-minded people in the industry.

"Next year I will get to be a judge for the Young Manufacturer of the Year award, and I can't wait to see all the presentations and the talent within the sector," he said.

Challenge of skills

It is clear the manufacturing and engineering sectors have a skills gap, but Sam believes it is an issue the industry is aware of and is taking action. "There are some amazing people out there for the industry to benefit from, but there are so many opportunities in manufacturing that aren't visible. At Encirc we host work experience for groups that cover every area of the business. It allows them to work with a mix of people with different interests and to realise the variety of roles that exist," explained Sam.



LEFT: Sam on the Encirc factory floor
ABOVE: Sam has been progressing through various roles at Encirc



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Sam Bennington, Senior Project Implementation Specialist, Encirc





and so, as Sam explained: "Giving them exposure through work experience allows them to see the impact they can have."

Mentoring the next generation

Manufacturing was one of the modules on Sam's degree, and this created the initial spark of interest in the sector. He added: "The work within manufacturing has so much impact. You can see the results of your work and know you are making a difference with the things you do."

However, he explained that it can be quite daunting coming from university into a large company as it means learning through new experiences and you could

ABOVE: Sam Bennington receiving his award at The Manufacturer MX Awards ceremony in Liverpool. Left to right: Simon Evans, awards host; Richard Jeffers, RS Group (award sponsor); Sam Bennington and Grace Gilling, Managing Director, The Manufacturer **BELOW:** The Encirc factory

potentially be surrounded by people who have been in their roles for their entire careers. "You need to be open minded and take advantage of learning from these extremely experienced individuals; have confidence and accept the transferring of knowledge," he urged.



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Indeed, when Sam started at Encirc, he was viewed as a fresh set of eyes across a variety of issues and projects, and someone who could suggest new ideas that hadn't yet been tried. "Embrace the opportunity that's there," he added.

The importance of mentoring within manufacturing is often discussed and Sam believes this is essential for building an individual's career and forging their path within an organisation. "For me, it was vital to have someone that I knew – who I could ask silly questions to and bounce ideas off – but there's no reason to have just one mentor. When coming into my full-time role, my manager stepped into that position for me. Yet, I am still looking for advice from other people around me and in different areas, such as the IMechE. It's great to have an external mentor, who's less specialised in my business but has wider industry experience," said Sam.

What's next?

Sam is enjoying his role at Encirc and sees plenty of opportunities for him to grow within the business. "There is a lot of change and investment going on at the company right now. I see myself focusing on more projects and hopefully progressing into a full-time management role in the future. To be able to build, develop and lead a team that can make changes would be great." ●

A JUDGE'S PERSPECTIVE

Micheal Sobodu is Chair of the Young Members Panel, Greater London Region at IMechE and Mechanical Facilities Planner at BMW Group UK. He was a judge and a key part of the decision to crown Sam winner of the Young Manufacturer of the Year 2024.

What is it like being a judge for The Manufacturer MX Awards?

MS: Being a judge is a rewarding experience. To help recognise the outstanding talent and achievements of those who are making significant impact in the industry was inspiring. It was exciting to see the creativity and progress of the young engineers in the manufacturing field.

The process is rigorous, but highly collaborative with my other judges – understanding the similarities and differences between the feedback for each applicant.

Why is the in-person judging day so important?

The in-person judging day is crucial for this category because it allows us to interact with the candidates and to engage face-to-face. It provides the judges with deeper insight into the applicant's motivation and potential for future growth within the industry.

There are nuances within people's characters that you cannot see from a written application, and when people are presenting themselves to you, they shine through. It gives us a chance to see qualities such as passion, drive, vision and interpersonal skills.

What made Sam stand out?

Last year's competition was tough and showcased a high level of applicants.

Aside from Sam's technical achievements and competence, which was a quality shared among many candidates, his commitment to the industry was what set him apart. Sam showed an ability to motivate others in the workplace and often engaged in



tasks that weren't directly associated with his role at work. This included getting involved in outreach programmes and showing a dedication towards mentorship over and above the official process.

What advice would you give to young people thinking of entering in 2025?

If you are considering going for Young Manufacturer of the Year 2025, be authentic and showcase your unique story by highlighting your achievements. However, be transparent about the challenges that you've faced and how you've overcome them. As a judge, I appreciate someone who demonstrates resilience and willingness to learn.

Applicants also need to trust the process; the application is rigorous, and we can see those who have given time and effort to it, so grab it with both hands.

What do the judges look for in each application?

We like to see confidence from the applicant in what they are talking about, their role and their achievements.

Judges are also interested in how the applicants' achievements contribute to the business as a whole and the wider manufacturing industry. It's important for applicants to articulate their goals and their strategies for the future through a development plan, outlining the next five to ten years of their career.