4th Storyworth A: How did you get your first job? Pre-Professional

This question suggests two possibilities; my earliest "jobs", and my professional career. So I plan to bifurcate the responses so as to show those two paths, since it will become clear from some of the former how they helped lead to much of the latter. And on that note, I really had four sub-segments; Jobs before I really thought of myself as "having a job"; Pre-professional jobs; Professional jobs as an employee in the IRS' W-2 sense, and lastly as the Independent Contractor as which I finished my compensated career.

It should be noted that I still maintain a professional presence on the internet with my personally maintained website at http://www.holzerent.com and on the IC job boards, in case something comes along which motivates me (such as needing added income, or shear boredom, neither of which has QUITE occurred, although I've gotten close on both ;-) Anyway…

My earliest "work", for which I received compensation, started with lawn maintenance and snow clearing. Having started with a borrowed gas mower and shovel from my parents, at 16 I purchased a plow, which soon gave way to a snow blower for efficiency. I also was an eager salesperson for things like the Boy Scouts, and regularly won prizes for my door-to-door selling of candy. Think like the Girl Scout Cookies, except it was candy and magazines, and I won things like a tape recorder deck, and obviously merit badges. So from about the age of 10 I was no longer getting any "allowance", per se, but had the freedom to dispose of my own earnings as I saw fit, with both good and stupid results until I eventually learned the value of my efforts ;-)

From my mid-teens I worked in pre-professional roles. Some of those were obtained by word-of-mouth from previous customers and my parents, and some were by happenstance. As noted in an earlier story, I worked for a guy who sold campers; pop-ups and hard bodied, but not motorhomes. I got that role because my Mom drove past the place daily and saw their "Help Wanted" sign, and she knew I knew how to use tools. That was a summer role between my sophomore and junior years at Clarkson, and combined with my having been given a '63 Chevy Bel Air Wagon by a friend of my Dad who thought it needed a new transmission, and figured it would be a good project car, he was happy to get it off his lawn.

With my Dad driving it (figuring we'd get it as far as we could without a tow, then pull it the remainder if need be ;-) I drove ahead and was dismayed to see parts bouncing off the ground beneath it as he drove behind me in his car, as I'd only recently gotten my license. Turned out it was only a broken U-Joint yoke on the drive shaft, and an entire replacement shaft was had for $10 at a local junkyard which lasted the life of the car. If I have the chance, I will write a LOT more about that car, as it had a storied life itself, which must remain for later at this point. However, when presented with the facts to the prior owner, he insisted it was still mine to keep, and it went the next two years to school and then two more years professionally in CT for me before the tranny ultimately DID die during the gas crisis of '74, to be replaced by my "Poor Man's Porsche" Toyota Corolla SR-5 in its first, and oddly best, rendition. But for now, the story revolves around the '63 Chevy.

That car allowed me to meet the girl who would become my wife, who worked as a lifeguard at a pond in Rhinebeck, a place neither I nor my brother were supposed to be swimming at since we lived south of there in Hyde Park. And she became my guest at a pool party thrown by my boss at his place, where I was mortified that she consumed more than two lobsters. Thankfully, Hal was a good guy and never raised the issue ;-) Might have been that she looked sharp in her white velvet handmade bikini, but I digress ;-) I enjoyed working for Hal that summer of 1971, and learned a lot about campers, including about the pull-out kitchen option on some, which I noted in my "Vacations" story earlier, and Hal was the person who gave us a great deal on renting a camper to take across CNY and southern Ontario, as well as back to my Alma Mater Clarkson, on our honeymoon in September 1973.

The ’72 summer Hal had no needs for me, so I found a job at the Virginia Chemicals plant on 9G in Staatsburgh, which was between Hyde Park and Rhinebeck. They made automotive AC refrigerant filters, and I was simply scut labor. But I also was between my junior and senior years at Clarkson studying Mechanical Engineering. After sweating while scraping paint in the paint booth, and working otherwise wherever they put me for basically minimum wage, one day I was assigned to their big transfer machine, the largest capital investment in the plant, which assembled 4 filters at a time from start to finish, requiring only painting for completion.

They had been having nightmares with the machine for reliability, as it was crushing canisters or having them pop apart and spew dessicant and filters all over the place, and had 25+ people sitting on their hands. Their Chief Engineer had been called up from VA and he had no success. So, as I learned later, it was with some bit of luck I wasn’t tossed on my ear when, having been assigned to the press position, I discovered a problem and set about to fix it – without the Plant Manager knowing what I was doing to his precious machine. The four press tools had hydraulic cylinders which pressed end caps onto the steel sleeves after filling with innards on other stations, then it sent them to the mig welder which secured the caps to finish the assemblies. But I observed that the cylinders had no jam nuts, so every stroke they would change the relative tool positions, which was the root cause of the problem, a term I did not at that time really understand like today ;-)

So I went to the tool crib, got four jam nuts the correct size and wrenches, and started to disassemble the machine. Unknown to me the PM watched, but did not interfere, and I was soon putting it back together again, and called the crew to start filling, which did not exactly endear me to THEM, anyway ;-) The machine worked perfectly the rest of the day, and thereafter. But that evening before I left I was called into the PM’s office. Expecting an ass-chewing, I was pleasantly surprised to find merely a few questions about my background, and then being told I was to work with his fifth-grade educated chief mechanic, who taught me EVERYTHING I went to my profession with about logic; electrical, hydraulic and fluidic, including reading schematics. And I never sweated in that paint booth again. My summer – only compensation didn’t change, in dollars, but…

I used that knowledge to launch a professional career in machine development, and never looked back. While I had studied stresses and thermodynamics at Clarkson, my role was never to build so it could fly, which meant only strong ENOUGH, but still light. Instead, I worked in industry and production, where durability and quality mattered, along with speed and cost reduction, which meant reliability so an individual employee could operate multiple machines without making too much waste product. So I built machines with 2 inch thick boiler plate, so that when (not if ;-) a fork truck backed into it, the machine would keep producing as it had, and the fork truck would require bodywork ;-)

I interviewed at Clarkson with Fafnir Bearing in New Britain CT, and was offered a job. The week before I was to graduate, though, I got an interview in Oswego at a plant whose name escapes me now. They made thermoset (one heat cycle only ;-) plastic parts which required forming a slug of resin the correct size to inject into the molds. The presses they used had a large ring gear, but straight teeth, and they were constantly breaking the one tooth at the same point on the ring gear at “bottom dead center”, the point of maximum load. They ran 440VAC, which is three phase. So I suggested they put side guides on the ring gear flywheel of the press so they could put toothed belts on them, and drop the motors using spacers to move the pinion gears out of direct engagement with the ring gear, and reverse any two wires in the motor, which would reverse its direction. That way the belt would take all the shock. I am certain that suggestion saved them thousands in repair costs and uptime, but their offer was still below that from Fafnir. So off I went to work as a Manufacturing Engineer in another state for the first time in my life, and my wife soon followed to work as a Public Health Visiting Nurse in New Britain CT ;-)

Joe Holzer 1/19/2021