Pat O'Neill never imagined wanting to set up his own business, as he was happy working for someone else. Circumstances were to change, however, and that is exactly what happened.

A graduate of Management Science from Trinity College, Dublin, Pat began his career with Smurfit Ireland, working in a number of production and quality management positions. In the late 1990’s, he began working with M&C Specialties, a family-owned company headquartered in the USA. The company specialises in the manufacture of adhesive and tape diecuts for use in various products such as plastic mouldings, electronic products and medical devices. An Irish subsidiary of M&C Specialties was established in Athlone. Pat trained with the company in the USA and ran the operation in Ireland. He developed it from an empty shell to a busy manufacturing unit with 20 staff, which gained global customers in the medical device, industrial and automotive sectors.

In 2007, as the US family had no one left in the family to take over the business, they decided to sell M&C Specialties to a large multi-national, who at the time were buying a company a week. After the takeover, it became apparent to Pat that the Irish plant was going to be shut and production would not be staying in Ireland. “They really didn’t have enough managers to look after all their acquisitions. They started closing down some of their smaller businesses. Unfortunately, one of them was ours”.

In 2012, the impending closure proved to be the catalyst that stirred Pat’s entrepreneurial aspiration. In September 2012, a few months before the company closed for good, Pat left to set up on his own. “I wanted to keep my own job and those of my colleagues on the island of Ireland. I wanted to continue working in the same industry, so I used the opportunity to set up ZAC.”

By establishing Zenith Adhesive Components (ZAC) alongside engineering director Jonathan Whately, they managed to save a number of jobs and kept production in Athlone. Pat and his team succeeded in winning some old customers back and have won many more customers over the last eighteen months. “Winning new customers is down to the flexible ‘can-do’ attitude of the staff and our ability to turn around ideas and orders in a timely fashion. For many of our Irish customers, we are supplying products that would otherwise have to be imported from the UK or the USA.”

In October 2013, ZAC moved to their current location in Blyry Business Park, Athlone. The facility has been ISO 9000 certified and contains a Class 8 Clean-room for manufacturing products in a controlled air environment. ZAC manufactures adhesive components for bonding, shielding, insulation, protection and skin attachment of devices. With a strong customer base in Ireland, ZAC has also begun exporting to the USA and the UK.

In February 2014, the company was included as one of Enterprise Ireland’s High Potential Start-Ups (HPSU) and received a substantial investment to further penetrate international markets, increase their sales and employ more staff. “Enterprise Ireland have been a great support. The funding alone allowed us to go ahead and purchase vital machinery to make more sophisticated parts. It has jumpstarted our production and increased our overall volume capacity. Without this help, it would’ve taken us much longer to get this far.”

For Pat, getting the business to be self-sufficient before concentrating on further development was important. “We are almost halfway through our second year of trading and are breaking even. Now, we can focus on our long term strategy. We have various products in the pipeline that are very promising.” ZAC currently has eleven full time staff. Depending on customer orders, additional staff is also recruited on short term contracts on an ongoing basis.

Pat is a founding member of both the Midlands Gateway Chamber of Commerce and the Midlands Manufacturing Meitheal, a forum where business owners support each other and help overcome the vast array of issues that arise in their businesses. “Supporting local entrepreneurs in the Midlands is crucial. I find it extremely rewarding to be able to mentor and advise others.”

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