

Media release

Tuesday, 20 May 2025

Plastics industry rising stars honoured at Plastics NZ Awards

He's not a doctor, a nurse, or even a police officer but Rajeneel Kumar helps to save lives.

Named 2025 Competenz Plastics Apprentice of the Year at the annual Plastics NZ Awards on Thursday, the Manurewa local produces critical components for lifesaving technologies - from ventilators for premature babies to sleep apnoea devices and hospital masks.

"It's pretty cool how the components we make are used to save lives – it makes the job rewarding," says Rajeneel, who has spent over a decade at Fisher & Paykel Healthcare and last year completed his New Zealand Certificate in Plastics Processing (Level 4) with strands Injection Moulding through Competenz.

"I'd worked for Fisher & Paykel Healthcare for many years before starting my apprenticeship and I thought I knew everything, but my apprenticeship challenged me to dig so much deeper. I learned so much about plastics technology."

The accolade is a "huge thrill" for the 32 year old, who has worked tirelessly to achieve his goal.

"It hasn't been easy, especially working in the healthcare industry during Covid when we were running 24/7. I've also got two young kids, and my wife works in the afternoons so juggling the book work with family life was a big challenge. Winning Apprentice of the Year means so much to me. In 2023 I was named runner-up for Competenz Plastics Trainee of the Year, so to actually win this year is a huge thrill. It shows that all the research, all the work and all the support I was given was worth it."

Rajeneel saw gaining his apprenticeship "as an opportunity to improve myself," and it's a move that has certainly paid off. Now he has been promoted to Plastics Team Leader, and soon he'll be mentoring some of the young apprentices following in his footsteps.

Competenz Training Advisor Alan Smith couldn't be prouder.

"Rajeneel stands out from the rest," says Alan. "He performs well, shows willingness to learn and is always eager to learn new technologies. He has an ambitious mindset and is keen to explore further avenues to grow in his career."

Rajeneel's future at Fisher & Paykel Healthcare is bright. Operations Engineering Manager Shijoy Sam says he is a huge asset for the business.

"Rajeneel is ambitious, keen to take on new challenges and always goes above and beyond expectations. He leads the team by example, is diligent and gives 100 percent to everything he commits to," says Shijoy.

"Continuous improvement is part of the culture at Fisher & Paykel Healthcare, and Rajeneel always seeks ways to improve himself and his team."

The annual Plastics NZ Awards salutes those in the industry who are making their mark and Rajeneel is a stellar example. So too is Henderson resident Faleono (Junior) Esekia who stepped up to the podium alongside Rajeneel to take out Competenz Trainee of the Year, the top award for people training in New Zealand Certificate Level 3 qualifications. A plastics technician at product development and manufacturing company Adept Ltd, Junior completed his Level 3 injection moulding qualification last September and is now on the fast track to gaining his apprenticeship.

“I’m shocked and speechless to be named Trainee of the Year,” says Junior (33). “Having spent over ten years in the plastics industry, receiving this accolade means so much to me, and is the first step towards achieving my goal of gaining my apprenticeship and one day becoming the ‘Dr. Murphy’ of plastics and injection moulding!”

The father of four was inspired to forge a career in plastics after studying science at the University of Auckland.

“Seeing senior plastics technicians being able to mould and fix any issues with injection moulding made me want to be at that level of skill and knowledge. What I love most is that feeling I get when I solve an injection moulding issue and I’m able to get a product to run perfectly – that and getting to try out the new automation being introduced with new products.”

Junior’s Competenz Training Advisor Jonathan Newsome describes the plastics technician as “deserving, super helpful, polite and self-driven.”

“Junior completed all his assessments to a high standard, met all his deadlines and drove his qualification himself. The fact that he has now advanced into Level 4 demonstrates the drive he has to better himself,” says Jonathan.

Employer Patrick McElhannan has been equally impressed and can’t wait to see Junior continue to flourish in the organisation and the industry.

“Junior is the quiet achiever, he consistently demonstrates his ability as a plastics technician. He never seeks recognition but his work ethic and the high standard of work he produces is testament to the calibre of technician he has become. Because of this we as a business can see just how much value he adds daily within the workspace,” says Patrick.

“Junior is now recognised as an equal amongst his peers, and sometimes other more seasoned veterans within the plastics world seek advice from him. His ability to troubleshoot and diagnose root causes in plastics faults, his wide processing knowledge of a large catalogue of polymers, along with his extensive knowledge of programming and processing of automation cells including six axis robots, demonstrates just how far he has come through this apprenticeship.”

Patrick says he couldn’t think of a more deserving candidate for Competenz Trainee of the Year, adding, “Junior’s attitude towards working in a team, along with his displayed aptitude

amongst his peers, really sets the tone for what an incredible individual he is. Any moulding shop in New Zealand would be better off for having him around.”

-ends-

For further information, please contact Lisa Joe at Joe Public 021326662 or lisa@joepublic.co.nz