

Heather Hayward



Heather Hayward is Technical Improvement Manager at Ferndale Foods. The company is part of Oscar Mayer Limited who supply around 2.5 million chilled products every week to major supermarkets. Heather's blend of commercial skills and technical knowledge guarantees she enjoys busy, variety-filled days.

What does your role involve and how many people report to you?

As Technical Improvement Manager I ensure that we fully meet our retail customer's expectations. I use my commercial skills and technical knowledge to ensure we increase customer satisfaction with the food we produce and also look at continuous improvement and industry best practice. Two Key Performance Indicator Technologists, the Internal Audit Manager and his internal audit team report to me.

Thinking back to school days, did you know what you wanted to become?

The 'glamour' of medicine, as portrayed on TV, fuelled my interest in being a doctor. However, realising I wasn't going to get the A grades required, I chose Food Science - people will always need to eat.

What were/are your main interests, e.g. science in general, food technology, microbiology, nutrition, something else?

I didn't study food at GCSE, it was all about cooking, and I'm a hopeless cook! My main interests were nutrition, and microbiology. I also enjoyed geography, especially learning about poverty, famine and the unequal distribution of food.

What qualifications do you have? GCSEs? A Levels? Degree(s)/other?

I have 7 GCSEs and A Level Maths, Chemistry, Biology and General Studies. I struggled at A level as I couldn't find a practical 'relevance' and didn't get the grades required for medicine. So I went to South Bank University and studied BSc (Hons) Food and Consumer Studies. I got a 2:1 and secured a job straight away. I was later sponsored by my employer to do a Masters degree with the Open University in Manufacturing, Management and Technology.

In rough outline what was your job pathway - companies and job titles + anything of particular note, e.g. level of responsibility, exposure to any particular developments/issues?

My first job was as a Lab Technician at Ferndale Foods. After a year I applied for a job with the Quality Assurance (QA) team, moving on to become QA Team Leader - managing a shift of 6 QA Technologists.

A promotion to QA Manager was followed after a year up to Customer Technical Manager. I then couldn't progress any further without gaining more experience elsewhere. After 4 years at Ferndale I moved to frozen food company Ardo UK spending six years as a Technical Account Manager. I travelled all over Europe with my retail customers and learnt a lot about vegetables!

I next moved to the Premier Foods as a Quality Manager. After 2 years at Premier I was invited to join WVA Turner (part of ABP). The factory produced chilled pies and sausages. It was great to be back in chilled high risk foods again!! I managed a team of 25 people. An offer to return to Ferndale took me back, this time as Technical Manager for their ready meals factory. This was like coming home. I headed up Technical for ready meals for two years before becoming Technical Improvement Manager.

What were your aspirations when starting your career and what are they now?

Simple. To get to the top of my game as quickly as possible - my career was my number one priority. I gradually realised that it's not always about climbing the ladder. Sometimes it's just as important to find a job you are happy in and do it really well, working in a company where you feel valued and part of a family.

What single piece of advice you'd offer someone curious about working in the sector?

Get some work experience. Write to your nearest factory to ask if you can spend time with them. Many roles/opportunities are advertised by word of mouth. Getting your face seen and known will help you decide if this is the job for you and help when getting a job. Common sense and initiative are far more valuable to me than qualifications. Facts and figures can be taught but I can't teach common sense. Asking for work experience shows initiative and that you're a self-starter.

What would you say to encourage them further? ie what is the best bit?

I love how every day is different. One minute I'm risk assessing a potential food safety issue (will it harm our customer/damage our reputation?) the next I'm dealing with customers and later on I'll be sorting out a supplier issue. I've travelled home and aboard visiting suppliers. I have attended wonderful social events and I've made some fantastic friends. I have also never been out of work since joining the industry in 1999.

There is no shortage of jobs!