

Ella Connolly



Ella Connolly is Group Technical Support at chilled food manufacturer Samworth Brothers – one of the UK's largest chilled food manufacturers. The company makes a wide range of chilled food products, such as sandwiches, pies, ready meals, sausages and desserts, for many large retailers. It also owns the Ginsters and Dickinson & Morris brands. A love of travel and meeting people, and a curiosity to understand food production, brought Ella to Samworth.

What does your current job involve. What are your responsibilities?

I provide support to anyone who needs it across our 18 sites. This new role ranges from investigating issues to supporting the launch of new products, from commissioning new facilities, equipment and processes to approving artwork for new packaging. It's customer facing and I'm required to build and maintain strong partnerships with key stakeholders. Samworth Brothers includes a number of small businesses and I help support and nurture these by developing and maintaining high technical standards such as HACCP plans, quality management systems and legal requirements.

No two days, or even hours, are the same. A morning could see me completing a process trial and training a procedure before visiting a supplier in the afternoon to investigate an issue to resolve! There's a lot of problem solving which allows me to draw on my experience and expertise. I need the knowledge to support colleagues. And if I don't know then I need to know the people who do. The food industry continually evolves and develops, so I need to keep on top of everything from law to technology.

No-one reports directly to me, but while juggling a lot of projects, I also help others to prioritise their workloads and am involved in guiding and advising.

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

I was certain of three things: I wanted to travel, meet people and understand processes in food manufacturing. I wasn't especially science-orientated (a terrible confession!) but my food technology teacher inspired me to enrol on a food science summer school at Reading University. A presentation by a buyer, sharing stories of international travel, showed the potential and, after my gap year, I applied for a place at the University of Reading.

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

A levels in Food Technology, Biology Sociology and General Studies, BSc in Food Technology with industrial placement.

In rough outline what was your job pathway?

My degree included a year-long industrial placement working with Food Technologists at M&S. Prior to graduating I completed a placement with Heinz Foods as a Project Assistant. I joined Samworth Brothers in 2006 as a management trainee and began completing projects, and moved to other roles in Quality Assurance (QA), hygiene, production and commercial, eventually becoming a Group Auditor Assistant.

My next role was as a QA Manager, and later Process Development Manager, on a brand new site requiring site standards being created and implemented as well as training.

I became Group Auditor for Samworth Brothers in 2011. I was part of a team responsible for ensuring suppliers, including services (such as laundry, storage and distribution), are approved to the correct safety, legality and quality standards to meet retailer and site-specific approval systems. This involved developing group standards, systems and templates for auditing and working within a team to plan, organise and communicate effectively to ensure the supplier audits are completed. As well as working with UK suppliers my role took me around the world.

It was also my responsibility to be informed and inform – I monitored changes in legislation and customer requirements which may result in changes to group audit systems and procedures.

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

I was keen to travel and to be around people. I wanted to understand how things are made and how they work. My first trip to a factory supplying to M&S was a revelation. I was amazed by the work, people and equipment involved in seemingly simple tasks, such as preparing lettuce, mixing fillings and depositing chicken. It was intricate and vital. I was hooked!

The scope of my role ensures there is more than enough to keep me interested and challenged. I am also grateful for the nurturing and supportive nature of Samworth Brothers.

What single piece of advice would you offer someone curious about working in the Sector?

The variety is huge – with many roles to fill, from New Product Development to engineering. No two days are the same. Ever! It's exciting and challenging. The summer school was my 'lightbulb' moment, so I encourage others to get on a summer school. Apply for work placements to get the insider experience. And once you are with industry professionals, never stop asking questions!

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

For me it's the travel. My auditing role took across the globe – from Aberdeen to Vietnam. I love the industry's dynamic nature. I've new things to think about every day. I also love the coaching element. I'd have to go a long way to beat this job!