

Gary McMahon



Gary McMahon is the Company Microbiologist for Moy Park. The company is the largest poultry meat producer in Northern Ireland and also produces poultry in England. With four chilled foods sites in the UK and Northern Ireland, it employs more than 12,000 people and is one of the 15 biggest food companies in the UK.

What does your job involve? What are your responsibilities and how many people report to you?

I oversee the running of Moy Park's four laboratories, two in Northern Ireland and one in GB, as well as Consumer Relations. A team of 32 individuals across these four departments reports through to me via my team of Managers.

Our labs carry out the majority of Moy Park Group's microbiological testing, both agricultural and factory compliance testing, including serology, and allergens. Testing in-house is cost-effective and offers us greater control and convenience. Our labs are also an integral part of our R&D function, providing support and analysis on Group-wide initiatives such as our *Campylobacter*-reduction projects.

A major part of my work involves regular liaison with our retail customers, building on relationships developed during my previous role in Technical Account Management.

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

What were your main interests?

I had a very rough idea – but it wasn't involving food! I originally aspired to be a vet and followed that route as far as Queens University Belfast studying Applied Microbiology, which had a veterinary component. During my final undergraduate year, as I was working in Moy Park, I based my dissertation on the treatment of chicken carcasses with novel washes. This finally tipped the balance away from veterinary to food. I continued to work in Moy Park in their laboratories for the first two years of my PhD, although the time commitment from the latter finally forced me to leave and focus on my research.

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

I have 10 GCSEs and 4 'A' levels in Chemistry, Physics, Biology and Mathematics. My BSc Hons was in Applied Microbiology and my PhD is in The Study of Biofilms containing *Listeria monocytogenes*. My PhD involved trying to recreate biofilms from microorganisms recovered from different production environments and adding *Listeria*. I then developed techniques for viewing these biofilms. I completed my PhD whilst starting a full-time job – not something I'd recommend due to the demands of full-time working and learning.

In rough outline, what was your job pathway?

I worked as a laboratory technician with Moy Park for just over five years. Two years later, I returned as a trainee Technical Manager, to the laboratory, where I helped them achieve their laboratory accreditation. After 18 months, I moved into site Technical within our Ready-to-Eat facility. This was a conscious decision as I realised I needed factory experience to achieve my career aspirations.

In 2003 I was seconded to our Primary processing division, which was never part of my plan. When I joined Primary I was given the opportunity to manage, technically, the Tesco account. As we acquired other businesses, my role expanded and I focussed solely on Account Management.

Following a significant restructuring of our business, I was promoted to the role of Category Technical Manager – Primary, where I was responsible for all four Primary processing sites (two in Northern Ireland and two in Great Britain), including all their relevant customers. I continued in this role for nearly five years – my 6-month secondment turned into a 10-year stay!

In 2013, after another restructuring in the company, I took on my current role. I may have come full circle, but returned with much more experience and understanding of the wider business.

I was in the 'right place at the right time, with the right experience' as the company expanded in the mid-2000s, but I feel I've made the most of my opportunities and have grown with the company.

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

Whilst my current role is what I had aspired to, my career path has certainly not been what I had planned. This is a good thing, as if I had stuck rigidly to what I believed was best for me, I would have missed out on essential opportunities and experiences. Sometimes, you must take a risk and move out of your comfort zone – and also move sideways to move upwards.

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

Grab any opportunity with both hands! Every experience is beneficial, good or bad; don't be afraid of making, and learning from, mistakes.

What would you say to encourage them further? i.e. what is the best bit?

There are always new challenges in food microbiology and new ideas to explore, and you are continually learning.

Be realistic, don't expect to reach your aspirational goal within a year.

Within Moy Park, I enjoy working with an enthusiastic team in a company which passionately wants everyone to do well. We can, and we do, make things happen!