

Helen Smith



With more than 25 years in the industry Helen has a wealth of experience in many roles. Since 2010 she has worked for Greencore, a leading manufacturer of convenience foods, employing around 11,000 people in the UK. One of its roles is to provide a range of chilled foods to major retail customers such as Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury's and ASDA.

What is your current job title and what does it involve? What are your responsibilities and how many people report to you?

I'm currently a Technical Controller. (To find out more about Helen's role see Chilled Education's Technical Controller job description: www.chillededucation.org/job-categories/food-tech)

I've worked for Greencore since 2010, firstly as Technical Controller at Bow in London. Our 85+ team covered Hygiene, Process, Technical Services, QA.

I moved to Greencore Northampton in 2015 as Technical Controller, firstly for Technical Services (Systems & Raw Materials), and I currently head up the Hygiene function with around 160 colleagues via three direct reports working across five high care factories. There is never a dull moment in M&S sandwiches!

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

Not specifically. I always knew that I wanted to work in food or the areas of food and nutrition. I had investigated becoming a Dietician at one point, and even a consumer rights journalist.

What were/are your main interests, e.g. science in general, food?

It was always food in general, with a particular interest in consumer information, food safety standards and food adulteration. I'm still interested in this now as it relates to colleague and customer welfare, information and training.

What qualifications do you have?

BSc (Hons) Applied Consumer Sciences
A level in English, Geography and Home Economics
Advanced Food Safety & HACCP, Lead Auditor

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

More than 25 years ago I started in specification and process type roles across a mix of factories, product ranges and customer types (in retail

and food service). Roles have included looking after food safety for an airline (with lots of international travel), working as a technologist and in product safety for Sainsbury's, various roles as QA and Technical Manager and now as Technical Controller. I've also worked in 5 different sandwich factories!

I've been very lucky over the years to interact with some amazing people. I completed my dissertation on baby food for the Food Magazine (a consumer magazine), won Sainsbury's Technical Manager of the Year and the British Sandwich Association Technical Excellence award.

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

Initially I wanted to become a Dietician but exposure to a consumer magazine helped open my eyes to food safety standards. I didn't have a formal career plan; I knew I wanted to influence standards from a food safety and ethical standpoint and to hopefully make a difference.

My aspirations now are very much around improvement of standards and processes, and for the development of my team. Supporting team members to grow and develop in their roles and careers is a real motivation for me.

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

There are so many opportunities in the food industry it's hard to name them all – keep your options open and you may find something that surprises you. Originally, I wanted to be a Dietician in a hospital and now I'm a Technical Controller covering five chilled food factories.

If it's your passion and where you want to go – keep going. Don't fall at the first hurdle. We all make mistakes, the key is to learn from them. Remember there is help and advice out there.

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

I like so many areas, it's hard to pinpoint a specific best bit! No two days are the same! It's a great feeling when a team reaches a goal together, whether it's getting a Green in a customer audit or maintaining AA+ at BRC. The 'in it together' feeling is amazing. Seeing work you have completed positively influence a factory, a food safety process or a team of people can be especially encouraging