# Chilled Careers

## Rebecca McSweeney

Rebecca McSweeney is Technical Manager in the Analytical Services Department of Bakkavor. The company manufactures and markets a wide variety of fresh prepared food, covering a range of categories including meals, desserts, pizza & bread and salads.

### What are your responsibilities and how many people report to you?

My job is quite varied and involves working with our 23 manufacturing sites to help identify the best testing to conduct on our products and within our factories, helping with risk assessments, investigations and incidents in response to testing, as well as managing the two internal laboratories within the business. I have a team of 47, with three direct reports.

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

Not at all. I loved food science (those were the days when it was an option at school) but wasn't sure what that could lead into.

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

I loved cooking and learning about what was in food and how it could impact upon us. I also loved sport and maths. I really enjoyed school and learning new things and that has stayed with me throughout my career.

### What qualifications do you have?

I have a degree in Food and Human Nutrition.

### In rough outline, what was your job pathway?

I took a degree which had a year in industry included i.e. a sandwich course. I spent six months working in West Africa with children who were malnourished before coming back to the UK and doing nine months in nutritional research. This was invaluable as it helped me establish that I didn't want a career in public health or research. Work experience really helps identify what you like and don't like, and I would always encourage people to do this if they can.

Once I graduated, I started work for a company called Geest on its graduate scheme. I have worked for the same company since I graduated 15 years ago (it's now called Bakkavor, having taken over Geest). One of the benefits of working in a large organisation is that you can move around and try different things, but all within the same business.

My first two years were spent at two different sites in two different technical roles. My first was in quality assurance and the second as a process technologist.

This was great for me as I hadn't been in a factory before and it gave me a solid understanding of the role of Technical and how we set and monitor standards whilst supporting our Operations colleagues. I then moved to one of our salads factories in Scotland as a quality assurance supervisor.

I joined our Central Technical team 12 years ago and over this time I have worked in a variety of roles ranging from raw materials, risk assessments, audits, customer management and now analytical testing. My career choices have always been motivated by a desire to learn and a need to have variety in the day to day.

The great thing about a career in Technical is that it is really varied and any role that you do, builds onto the next. Although the incidents and the problems are not what you want, the learning that you get from them is invaluable. Within my career, the biggest incident is most probably 'horsegate' (in 2013 traces of undeclared horse meat were found in frozen beef burgers made in Ireland). Although we and UK chilled food in general weren't directly impacted as a business, the fallout for the industry was huge and had a massive impact on the work I was doing in raw materials, as I had to develop and implement a new integrity risk assessment for the business.

I have had some brilliant role models throughout my career; people who have championed, supported, and coached me and it is something that I think has been invaluable to my learning and development. We all have people within our team that we build an affinity with, and my advice would be to seek out time with these individuals and build a relationship with them.

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

I have never really known what I wanted to do which has meant I wasn't opposed to doing different roles and was open to trying new things, but it has also been frustrating at times as I struggle to articulate what I want to do next. I know that I want to continue to develop and progress, but I am open to what this looks like.

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

Have a go – and don't be afraid to reach out to people. Placements, apprenticeships, graduate programmes are all really good ways to get some experience and most businesses will offer something. Chose a business that you like the look of – the values that they work to is a good place to start.

### What would you say to encourage them further? i.e. what are the best bits?

The best bits for me are the people and the variety of the day to day. There are so many options within the Technical function, but also within the industry as a whole.