

Nicola Wilson



Nicola Wilson is General Manager Westward Laboratories, Samworth Brothers and also Company Microbiologist for the Samworth Brothers Group. The company produces chilled and ambient products and employs more than 8,000 people at sites in Leicester, Cornwall and the North West.

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

As General Manager of Westward I steer the direction, and secure the success of the laboratory, which covers both sales from Samworth and external sales from across the food, beverage and water industry. This involves applying my technical expertise and knowledge, coupled with strong management and leadership skills. Westward Labs, based in Cornwall, employs 44 people and I have overall responsibility for the team within the management structure.

As company microbiologist, I work across all our production sites (in Leicester, Cornwall and Manchester), helping to look after the microbiological safety of all our products. I work very collaboratively with all my technical colleagues using my experience (30+ years in microbiology) to support, share information and to solve problems. To enable me to do this I need to keep up to date on the very latest food safety developments and apply this knowledge daily, especially in the fast-moving environment of chilled food where microbiological challenges crop up with little or no notice.

I also use my experience and knowledge to horizon scan – spotting both potential issues and potential opportunities; for example looking at how whole genome sequencing technology could be used in food manufacturing to help prevent food poisoning outbreaks.

Lastly, I am a qualified leadership coach and I coach colleagues from within the Group to be the best they can be within their current roles and in their futures in the Food industry.

Samworth Brothers produce a diverse range of food from baked goods to sausages and cooked meats to ambient-stable. But chilled is most exciting – more things happen in chilled to keep us busy!

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

I didn't have a clue! I was a 'foodie' but had no idea I'd end up working in food. Though I'm happy that I did.

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

My career path is a little eclectic. My interests were varied and so I followed those – studying 'A' level Biology, Economics, and English Literature. But they were never taking me in a specific direction – though I had passed Chemistry 'O' level and should probably have taken this to 'A' level as it's important for technical work.

And your further qualifications?

I took a combined BSc Hons degree in Microbiology, Computer Science and Sociology at Plymouth University. I was still unsure what I wanted to do after university (though I dropped the Sociology modules, so I was clearly edging towards a science path). I stayed in Plymouth to take a Doctorate in Environmental Microbiology – but even then I wasn't really thinking about longer term career options. I was considering going into research and also applied for roles in environmental pollution (in the oil industry) but then chance took over...

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?

A friend was working in the food industry and introduced me to Samworth Brothers. I applied for and was offered a middle management role in Westward Laboratories. I have been with the company ever since. Over the years the Group and Westward has changed, developed and expanded. My original job title was Microbiology Co-ordinator and I stayed in this position for around ten years. Over the ten years the business grew, as did my responsibilities. I was then promoted into the General Manager position and Company Microbiologist, which is my current role.

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

Before joining Samworth I was unaware of roles within the food industry. I'd had some work experience with ICI's labs but had not considered management roles and was more research focussed. When I joined Westward I had my sights very firmly set on becoming General Manager for the laboratories.

The Group has allowed me to develop and grow over time – my coaching qualification is an example of this. Working for Samworth Brothers and the food industry has given me responsibilities and challenges. I enjoy being in a leadership role, working across different sectors of the food industry and nurturing future talent.

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

Get some experience – however short or long, even if it's unpaid. That way you can discover what variety there is in the industry and understand what you enjoy; for example, Samworth Brothers offer 12-month industrial placements where you spend six months in two different businesses with a structure that offers a taste of different departments.

What would you say to encourage them further? ie: what are the best bits?

It's an exciting industry, fast-paced and dynamic. The variety keeps me interested and I love working collaboratively with colleagues to problem solve. It is an excellent environment in which to apply your science, and to keep on learning and expanding your knowledge. You move with it, you never go stale – the business won't allow you to!