Chilled Careers

Career Progress

Kelly Merry

Kelly Merry is a Product Development Controller at Greencore

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

I have a team of five currently but previously had 23! A typical day can be anything from shaping a new brief with the team and generating new and innovative ideas, to chairing a feasibility meeting cross functionally to ensure we are sharing our products with the site teams so we have confidence we can make them at scale. On other days I can be found at M&S head office presenting to the team there. The best bit about the job is getting out of the office to find inspiration from around the country in food halls and restaurants!

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

I definitely knew I wanted to work in food and loved design technology of every kind be it food, sewing, or woodwork. I just knew I would be good at creating things!

Also thinking about school, did you have a particular teacher who inspired you to take the career path you've followed?

Yes, my Home Economics teacher. That lesson wasn't just about cooking; we would think about nutrition and the packaging, how the product would look once in pack, key calls out (information re allergies etc) and messaging on pack.

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

Mainly creating great tasting food. I left school and went on to do a cookery course which was the foundation of things to come.

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

I didn't get amazing grades at school. I worked hard and left with a few GCSEs but then went on to further education in professional cookery, I then got a summer job and got noticed and they said they would send me to college to do further chefs course, This was the equivalent of City and Guilds 706/1/2. I carried these courses out whilst still working doing a day release each week.

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?

I think it's been really important for me to have started in a manufacturing environment before heading into product development as it keeps me real and I understand how factories work. I worked on the shop floor in Greencore for a few years from age 16 before landing my first job in product development as a Kitchen Assistant at age 18 – Greencore produce ready meals and quiche for all the major supermarkets. I then was promoted to Junior Development Chef pretty quickly before leaving to take on a role as Development Chef at Northern Foods in 2003. This role saw my developing sandwiches and sushi solely for Marks and Spencer. I have to say this was by far the highlight of my career; I loved this job so much, there was so much scope to design and develop delish food concepts! I did this role for three years before then moving on to Thomas Foods where I landed my first New Product Development Manager role. I was 25 at the time. Thomas Foods produced quiche and party food for Waitrose and other supermarkets. This was a steep learning curve, never having had any direct reports before.

After a few years I decided I wanted a family and the manager role wouldn't have been quite right for me at this time so I moved back to Greencore as a Senior Product Developer. I looked after multiple customers at this level, which helped me gain a greater understanding of how to design products to hit target costs and nutrition, something that was less important as a chef. I progressed to Product Development Manager and again worked on a number of accounts for a number of years, launching hundreds of new products along the way.

In 2019 I was promoted to look after a new area of business and given my role as Development Controller. I have now had several roles at this level and more recently have just taken up the role of looking after our biggest customer, Marks and Spencer. The further up the ladder you go in this industry the more it becomes about people. Your teams get bigger and the role becomes more about managing teams – be that your own, the site or the customer – and less about the product development itself. The biggest challenge was having the team of 23 across several site and multiple customers, but one that was rewarding when we were getting great results!

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

Always to get to this level, and if I'm honest I never thought I could, but I worked extremely hard to progress myself and learn new things all the time by changing companies, product areas and customers to give me a real broad understanding of product development, and I am really happy here now and don't wish to push forward any further. I now take great pride in leading teams to create great products and watching them get the praise they deserve!

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

Don't underestimate the pace – it's quick! We have to react at pace to what the customer asks for. It's not for everyone but if you are passionate about food and seeing what you have created land on the supermarket shelves it could be for you!

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

As above there is nothing better than seeing what you have worked on land on the shelves, and then if it works and sells that's an even better feeling! My late father used to say to me if it was your idea why don't they put your name on it!! Bless him! For me now its all about my teams, I want them to progress and grow and I like to be able to give them the opportunities I once had and then one day they can be in my shoes.