Chilled Careers

Career Progress

Nicola Benniston

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Group Technical Director, Oscar Mayer Foods

What does your job involve? What are your responsibilities and how many people report to you?
My role is to ensure that our products are safe, legal and of the right quality. I have three direct reports: Group Technical Services Manager, Group Supplier Approval Manager and Integrity Lead and Group Protein SME. I have indirect responsibility for the two Heads of Technical at two large sites. I also drive the technical strategy in line with our business and customer strategies and move the business forward technically.

Thinking back to school days, did you know what you wanted to become?
I wanted to be a teacher and loved the sciences, particularly Biology. I considered medicine but felt my grades wouldn't be good enough.

Also thinking about school, did you have a particular teacher that inspired you to take the career path you've followed?
Unfortunately, we didn't focus on food science. Food was only seen as cooking, though I had many great teachers who inspired me to do well and to push myself.

What were/are your main interests, e.g. science in general, food technology, microbiology, nutrition or something else?
My main interest was Biology. Chemistry and Physics were good and I was glad I studied the three subjects. I loved Home Economics, but didn't choose this at GCSE and it wasn't pushed at the time by the school.

What qualifications do you have? GCSEs? A Levels? Degree(s)/other?
I did three A' Levels. I completed my Batchelor Degree in Food Science through day release whilst I worked, and achieved a First Class Honours. I later decided I wanted a wider understanding of business, and completed a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) through an apprenticeship at 2 Sisters Food Group. I graduated in 2021.

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?
During my studies I had worked in catering, becoming a Laboratory Technician at Nottingham Boys' High School as my first permanent role. But this wasn't for me and when a Taste Panel Technician role came up at Riverside Bakery in Nottingham (then part of Northern Foods) I jumped at the chance. This introduced me to large-scale food manufacture and I soon moved up to be a Quality Assurance (QA) Technician working in the factory and looking after projects related to complaints and food safety. Following Riverside Bakery, I joined a local family-run company with two bakeries (manufacturing sites) and 44 retail shops across Nottingham and Derby. My role was QA Manager. This was a brilliant experience, as we produced everything from raw meat sausages, cooked pork pies through to fresh cream cakes and wedding cakes. I was allowed to use my knowledge to positively change and improve the Nottingham bakery. Next I worked in a small craft bakery in Leicester.

I then worked in a number of businesses, working up through the technical roles. I worked for Northern Foods at Pennine Foods as a Technical Manager. This was the first big, complicated site that I had run and I learnt much, especially on food safety and *Listeria*. I then ran sites from a technical point of view at New Ivory in West Yorkshire and with Samworth Brothers in Leicester. This allowed me to work with different retail customers and understand their requirements.

I moved into the meat division at 2 Sisters Food Group, where I spent six and half years looking after up to eight sites. This experience allowed me to take what I'd learnt at a site level and support the varying sites' technical standards. The biggest responsibility, after governance, was ensuring everyone was consistently working towards the same standards and sharing learnings. My responsibilities included mentoring and coaching others. People and teams should be remembered regarding succession planning and the future.

My current role and responsibility is again to drive consistency and shared, as making our customers feel confident in what we do and how we do it.

What were your aspirations when starting your career and what are they now?
As I started my career, I didn't have a plan and at times I still don't think I have one, I still ask myself what do I want to be when I grow up?! Initially it was about learning new things and using that knowledge to make things better and to work my way up through the ranks. Now, after 30 years in manufacturing, my aspirations are truthfully how to get to retirement and still be able to enjoy life after work! However I am still learning new things and am happy in my role and the level I've reached.

I aspire to leave the food industry in a better place than when I started in it, and that I have contributed to that change positively. Also, that I have inspired the people I have worked with.

What single piece of advice would you offer someone curious about working in the sector?
Hard to choose one as we learn so much along the way. No two days are the same and you'll find things changing regularly. Change is inevitable, especially in chilled manufacturing. Don't be afraid to ask questions. 'Feel the fear and do it anyway' is what I was always told.

What would you say to encourage them further? i.e. what are the best bits?
With so many opportunities in food manufacturing and avenues you can follow, don't feel pressurised to stay in one role or type of role. The variety makes the sector very exciting to work in.