

‘A Day in the Life’ of a Senior Scientist

**1) Please give a brief description of what you do & the company you work for?**

I work for Synthomer (UK) Limited in Harlow. It is a polymer chemical manufacturer and my current role is Senior Scientist. In the past, I have held the roles of R&D Chemist, Senior Chemist, Analytical Department Manager and UK R&D Manager too. I have worked with them for 20 years in total.

My role is to provide operational support to one of our plants near Grimsby; to oversee approximately half of our 14 PhD students at Universities across the UK & Europe; to provide process safety advice, particularly when it comes to scale up of reactions from lab to plant; to steer the introduction of new manufacturing technology and to provide mentoring for some of our younger scientific staff.

**2) What does your average day entail? Where do you work? (Environment - Office, home, studio etc.) What is your work pattern? (full time/part time etc) What are the main activities during your day? (i.e. meetings, emails, practical tasks, visiting clients etc).**

I work mainly in an office in Harlow, above the company's main research and development laboratories. I spend a lot of my time planning and overseeing projects; making sure they run as they should; trouble-shooting when things go wrong in Grimsby. I spend significant time on the computer, writing notes, instructions e-mails, etc. I also get to travel to the plant at Grimsby every 2-3 weeks and this is the part of the job I like most, i.e. working with huge chemical reactors! I also get to travel to meet suppliers and technical experts in chemical manufacturing. Once in a while, I still actually get the chance to spend time in the labs! More than 90% of my time is based in Harlow, where I work Monday-Friday with office hours 9-5....but I do tend to do a little bit more. I finish work, when the job is done for the day.

**3) What skills and qualification are required for your role?**

I hold a PhD in Polymer Chemistry and I would say that an analytical and logical approach is important to my job. I have to be able to communicate well with people of all skill levels and understanding and often have to deal with colleagues and customers or suppliers who don't have English as a first language. It is a truly international business and our Harlow labs have staff from more than a dozen countries.

Other people working in the labs will have very different academic pathways to the jobs they do. We mostly take graduate chemists for our roles of Chemist and above. For technologists, we take people with A Levels or BTECs too. Technologists can progress to the professional chemist status, by studying at University on day release, which is something we encourage and sponsor, for those who show the right skills in their work.

**4) What do you enjoy most about your job? What are you least favourite aspects of your job?**

I love working on the plants with the big reactors and being involved in projects which make a visible or material difference to the business. An example would be a project I lead for Grimsby, which resulted in our environmental emissions being reduced by over 90%. It cost over £2 million to do the job, but it resulted in increased sales because our products became more environmentally friendly. I also really enjoy working with many talented and friendly colleagues. That is the main reason why

I've stayed with the company for over 20 years. I don't really enjoy long meetings and writing reports, though I accept that both are important parts of what I do. I enjoy meeting people from all around the world in my work, but I don't like the actual time spent travelling!

**5) What were your favourite subjects at school? Why? Do these link/relate to the job you do now?**

My favourite subjects at school were maths, physics and chemistry and I use them all the time in my job. I couldn't get by without a good understanding of all three. I was pretty keen on Geography too, which is a bit relevant, to make sure I end up in the right place when I'm travelling!!

**6) How did you get to where you are now? (i.e. academic routes, professional development, career opportunities)**

I just gained more and more experience in my fields of interest and have been selected for the various roles I've held. I've never had to apply for a change of job within Synthomer and have thoroughly enjoyed the different challenges that have come my way. I've not been hugely ambitious, since family is very important to me. I didn't want to spend all my time on an aeroplane, whilst my children were growing up.

**7) What advice would you give to our aspiring students who are interested in pursuing a career in your profession?**

Do something you enjoy, because in all likelihood, you'll be doing it for 40 years or more! If you do it well, the opportunities will come. You are never too old to learn new things. Always look for training or learning opportunities, e.g. the chance to study something that you are interested in. It will help you get more options to develop in your chosen profession.

**8) In your current profession what are the potential development and progression opportunities?**

I could do a number of things. At the moment, I am moving further towards manufacturing excellence roles, i.e. making our plants safer, and more efficient. I could go back to R&D but I find that less interesting these days, having done it for many years. I could look to go back into management, but I would rather have the freedom of choice that my current job gives me. I don't have to manage any people right now and it really suits me. I can focus on my strengths, which tend to be around solving mechanical, safety and chemical problems for the company.